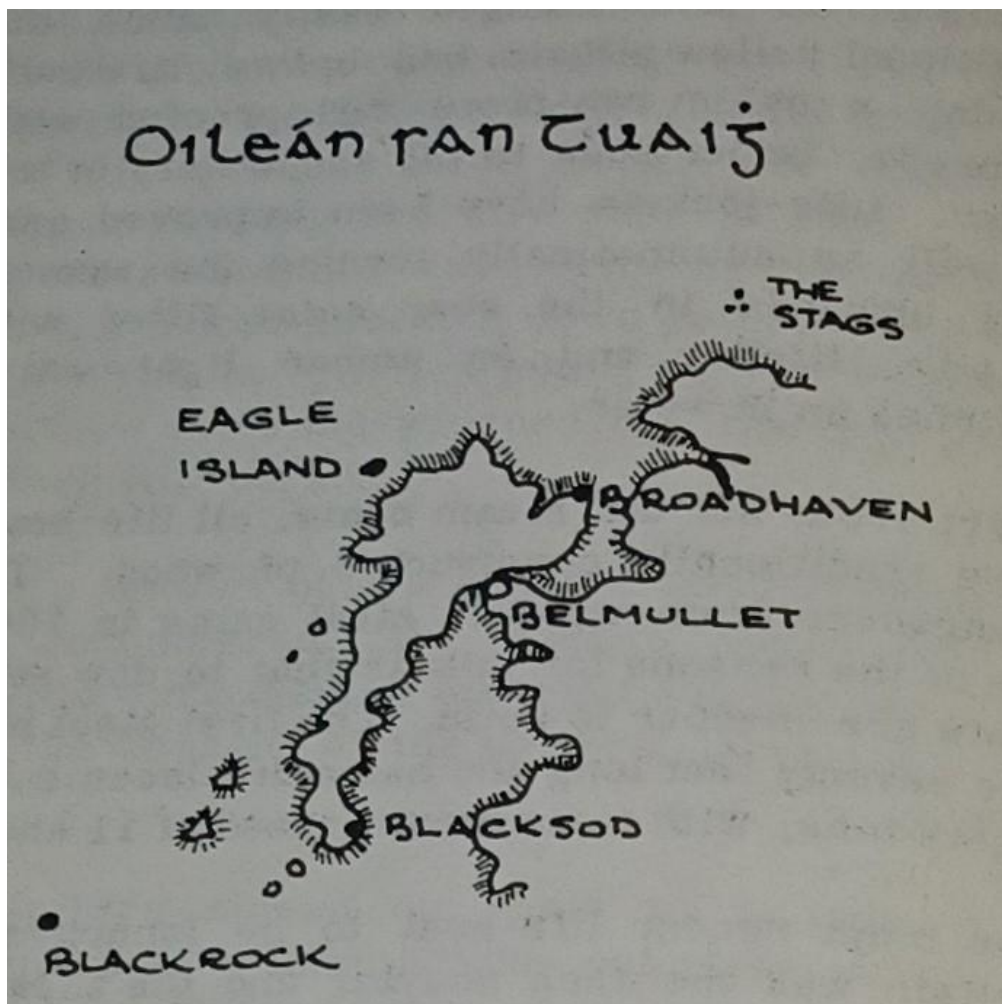


Green Seas and Small Boats

A history of Mayo's Eagle Island and its lighthouse



Peter Goulding



Eagle Island location off the coast of Erris (M.P.L. Costeloe sketch from Beam 4.2)

Green Seas and Small Boats

– A History of Mayo's Eagle Island and
its Lighthouse

by Peter Goulding

By the same author

When the Light goes out – a Collection of Fatalities at Irish Lighthouses

The Hero, the Widow & the Army Pensions Board (biography)

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The Complete Community Voice Musings (essays on Dublin 15)

He Wishes for Nike Runners

The Six Gifts of Womanhood

A Flash of Orange

Dining with Milton and Bunyan (all comic verse)

Front cover picture – “Eagle Island off Erris Head, W. Coast of Ireland” by Admiral Richard Brydges Beechey

Back cover photo courtesy Anthony Gallagher

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Preface

Lying in bed as a child in our house in Corclough, I remember the soothing boom of the Eagle Island fog signal echoing all around, telling me it was there and I was safe. In stormy weather, I would gaze in awe at the giant white blooms crashing over the top of the light or over the rocks near the South landing, as if a bored and restless ocean was letting off steam after its incredible journey from the Americas. It seemed that there was a connection between my puny self and that near yet remote lop-sided, inaccessible island and I knew that one day I would have to visit and walk on its verdant, historical slope and place my palm on its legendary storm wall.

It was therefore inevitable that many years later, I would do precisely that, a lightkeeper returning home to the sights and sounds of his boyhood. I picked my way through the ruins of the old East light dwellings and actually heard the cries of the women and children as the door smashed open and the sea poured in. As I climbed the hallowed steps of the West tower, I imagined that small boy waiting on the shoreline for the light to come on, so he could run home. But I was home now. This was where I belonged.

That is how it should have been but unfortunately none of it is true. I am from the other side of the country and I only heard of Eagle Island when well into my forties. I have never even set foot on the island.

I am well aware that this book should have been written by the boy and man in the first two paragraphs, born and reared on the Mullet. I am also aware that I am a poor substitute and can only apologise to local people for my substandard upbringing.

This book started off as the story of the five (now four) lighthouses of Erris. I realised very early on that the amount of information I had on Eagle Island alone would be enough for one book and reluctantly dropped the other three. Like my other lighthouse book, this one naturally suffers from lack of access to Irish Lights' archives which have been closed for years now, while they catalogue, preserve and digitise. If there were any prospect of the lighthouse journals being made available any time soon, I might have held off but, as the years slip by, it seems wiser to plough ahead and let others fill in the gaps in this record later.

Doubtless, some historians will scoff at my distinctly non-academic style of writing; some locals will throw their eyes to heaven at my lack of local knowledge, and former keepers will be quick to point out errors in dates or nicknames. And they would be right. I only hope none of my errors are large ones.

Pete Goulding
May 2024

Author's note on the lightkeepers

Up until 1905, the details of the lighthouse personnel on Eagle Island – or any other station around the coast, for that matter – were sketchy. Proper records were not kept and sources of information were scant. Titbits have been gleaned from genealogical sources, newspaper articles and secondary Irish Lights sources but, too often, postings to Eagle Island have fallen under the radar, chiefly because the keepers did not have unusual surnames or they did not come up in despatches for good or bad conduct!

However, Frank Pelly, former archivist at Irish Lights and an absolute legend to lighthouse historians like myself, together with Des Sharkey, has managed to pore through Irish Lights journals and payment records from 1905, to come up with an almost comprehensive list of keepers who served on the island and when. They also used the seniority lists which were drawn up in May prior to the Commissioners' annual inspection of lighthouses. It has proved incredibly useful for the purposes of this book and I am extremely grateful.

I say that it is an 'almost comprehensive list' because, as Frank explains, it does not include principal or assistant keepers who may only have served there for a very short space of time and have not been captured in the payments lists. Nor does it include supernumerary keepers, for whom Irish Lights, sadly, kept few records. But I am happy with 'almost comprehensive.'

Lightkeepers were ranked as principal keepers; assistant keepers (at one period, 1st and 2nd class); female assistant keepers (on two-person stations, where a wife, daughter, sister etc shared the duties); probationary keepers (or 'probies') later known as supernumerary, or relief, assistant keepers; and temporary keepers (local men who knew the job and could stand in temporarily).

The keeper's service number – I give this only at the first mention of his name – denotes his seniority number (not his age!) The seniority list was first drawn up on the 12/13 April 1900. Any keeper who had left the service by that date was not included and will not have a number in this book. The longest serving keeper on that date, Thomas Redmond, was given No. 1, the second longest serving – Robert Tyrrell – was No.2, and so on. Paul O'Farrell was the last keeper at No. 701. Thomas was so old that he only lasted a couple of weeks with the service after the list was drawn up! Until the very later years, SAKs did not normally get a number until promoted to AK. The full list can be found in Bill Long's *Bright Light White Water*.

In the indices at the end of this volume, I have not included the names of the lightkeepers' wives or children. This is not down to a lack of respect for their contributions to the running of the light. On the contrary, there is a whole story still to be written on the families and their struggles. But, if I had included them all, the index would have been longer than the book.

Acknowledgements

I was conscious that the last keepers left the service of Irish Lights almost thirty years ago and that in another thirty years, there will be no further first-hand accounts of this old and venerable profession. In consequence, I tried to talk to as many people as I could who had any angle on the Eagle Island story. For some people, I had no contact details. Others simply didn't reply, whether through distrust of me or lack of interest or maybe they simply didn't feel their stories would be of interest. And I have no problem with that.

But thankfully, some people did. As somebody who has never been a lightkeeper, nor ever set foot on Eagle Island, this book would not have been possible without the generosity of many people who took time to recount anecdotes and explain patiently the workings of the service. I am particularly indebted to the following: -

Alan Boyers, Gerry Butler, Brendan Conway, Louis Cronin, Jack Cummins, Richard Cummins, Peter Deaton, Joanna Doyle, Sean Doyle, Bill Duffy, Rosemarie Geraghty, Barbara Heneghan, Anthony Hickey, Knut Janson, Jean King, Joe McCabe, Noel McCurdy, John McIntyre, Andy Newman, Ciarán O'Bríaín, Eugene O'Leary and the staff at Blacksod lighthouse.

And there are certain people who went out of their way to try and help me get this book out. Without them, this book would have been a lot slimmer and a lot less informative (again in alphabetical order) Very special thanks to: -

Martha Power Baxter, Anthony Gallagher, Al Hamilton, Alan Hayden, Dave Horkan, Eamon McAndrew, Joe McCabe, Christopher Nicholson, Seamus O'Farrell, Frank Pelly, Des Sharkey, Fergus Sweeney and Gerry Sweeney.

EAGLE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

LIGHTS (2) FIRST ESTABLISHED
2nd September 1835

1ST ORDER LIGHT INSTALLED
1st November 1895

3rd ORDER CATOPTRIC LENS INSTALLED
5th February 1927

CONVERTED TO ELECTRIC LIGHT
17th JULY 1968

CONVERTED TO AUTOMATIC OPERATION
31nd March 1988

CONVERTED TO SOLAR POWER
22nd October 2001

STATION CONSOLIDATED
November 2013

LED LIGHTS INSTALLED
17th November 2013

THE CHARACTER OF THE LIGHT IS
Flashing (3) White Every 20 seconds
 $0.8 + \underline{1.2} + 0.8 + \underline{1.2} + 0.8 + \underline{15.2} = 20 \text{ seconds}$

Visible 262°-115°(213°)
Partially obscured by land within 6m 110°-115°(5°)

THE NOMINAL RANGE OF THE LIGHT IS
18 Nautical Miles

THE HEIGHT OF THE LIGHT IS
67 Metres Above Mean High Water

Irish Lights Office,
Dun Laoghaire.

April 2014

The stats (photo by Dave Horkan 2015)

Eagle Island

On a calm evening, when the ocean is in deep repose and the setting sun reflecting his beams on the quiet waters, then does the view from Tarmoncarra¹ look a 'thing of beauty,' a joy to be forever contemplated. Silent as night appears the island while the lighthouse, standing on the highest and steepest part of the cliff, might be imagined as the guardian of the island.

And a guardian it really is, for many a gallant ship would in the darkness of night, in the midst of the howling tempest, be shattered to pieces against the opposing barriers of the island were it not for the lustrous, shining light warning the mariner of approaching danger and, like a guiding star, directing him safely on his trackless way.

But when old Neptune is disturbed from his repose by the rude, unsparing blasts of the storm, then a change, an awful, terrible change, takes place which strikes the spectator with awe. Then will he observe that, what a little while ago was pleasing to contemplate, is now roused into tremendous action, lashing the sides of cliffs and precipices with unexhausted fury, raising its foaming spray far over island and shore, and from the very depths of the ocean the waves rise mountain high, swelling as they ascend, and with deafening roar and overwhelming might are scattered in a thousand different directions, whence they return again with renewed vigour, and so continue until the storm is abated. The face of the cliff is indented with innumerable caverns and inlets, through which the waves come and go with a rumbling noise resembling distant thunder.

Surely, to contemplate such a scene as I have endeavoured to describe and which is a characteristic trait of this locality, must convince the most atheistical of the existence of an all-powerful and intelligent Maker; of an omniscient and omnipresent Creator who holds the wind and seas in the hollow of his hand!

(Written by an unnamed correspondent in the *Mayo Examiner*, Castlebar, Monday 3rd June 1872)

At one time, there were five lighthouses on, or just off, the Mullet peninsula. There are only four now but, in visiting all of them, or the viewing points from where they can be seen, you travel the length and breadth of this wild, remote and extremely beautiful peninsula, steeped in history and folklore. On a clear evening, it is said that is possible to see the lights of all four from the hill at Alt, Bunnahowen – off the peninsula itself – which doesn't seem possible, but I would never doubt local knowledge.

These four lighthouses are commemorated in the form of a tower in the centre of Carter Square in Belmullet. All four have their different characters. Blacksod, the square, red-granite light watching over the bay of the same name and the northern approaches of Achill; Blackrock, distant and remote, dangerous, surrounded by white water; Ballyglass aka Broadhaven, also distant and remote, hidden, retiring, placid; and Eagle Island, the subject of this book.

Speaking of which ...

¹ I have spelled the Erris townlands in this tome as per the sources. Therefore, they probably each have a number of different spellings. And why not?

A word about 'Eagle Island'

When you're settling down in your plane seat waiting to taxi onto the apron, it is always reassuring to hear the captain welcoming you on your flight to Tenerife, or Iceland, or wherever it is. You know you can't have got on the wrong flight with all the checks but still, just to be sure, to be sure, it's good to have it confirmed that you're not heading to Bishkek. (Not, I hasten to say to the hordes of Kyrgyzstani lighthouse enthusiasts reading these words, that there's anything wrong with Bishkek but you might not have brought appropriate clothes.)

And so, to all of ye who have bought, borrowed or stolen this book, the subject matter centres on Eagle Island, off the north-west coast of the Mullet peninsula in county Mayo. I say this because, in my research, I came across many Eagle Islands across the world.

There is an Eagle Island in Lough Gara, co. Sligo and others near Killarney in co. Kerry and Belleek in co. Fermanagh. There's one near Dumfries in south-east Scotland. The Isle of Mull in the Hebrides has been colloquially called Eagle Island. The book is about none of these.

Nor do the Eagle Islands in New York State, San Francisco, Idaho, North and South Carolina, Georgia, South Dakota, Florida, Massachusetts, Washington State, Georgia, Louisiana, Alaska or Wisconsin feature.

There is an Eagle Island in East Penobscot Bay in Maine that has a lighthouse on it but you will find out nothing else about it between the pages of this book. There are at least eight Eagle Islands off the Maine coast alone.

You will learn nothing about the Eagle Islands of British Columbia or Lake Huron; nor about the islands of the same name in Norway, Nigeria, Botswana, Queensland, Western Australia, the British Indian Ocean Territory, the Malvinas and off Antarctica's long tail.

Younger viewers will be doubtless disappointed that the book does not touch on Eagle Island off the coast in the *Disney Junior* animated series *Jake and the Never Land Pirates*. Nor is the Eagle Island of the *Angry Birds* film franchise mentioned, save in this paragraph. And there are of course thousands more.

Having said all that, this book is not supposed to be about Achill Island either but it is possible that stories of this much larger island, directly south of the Mullet peninsula, may have crept in. It was only midway through my research that I realised that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Achill was also known as Eagle Island. Whether this was due to the usual inept anglicisations of Irish place-names, or simply because Achill was home to a vibrant colony of sea eagles, I don't know. I also found one suggestion that there was a Spanish influence at work, as the Spanish word *aquila* means *eagle*. But I have had to assess any reference to 'Eagle Island' with jaundiced eyes.

Where the reference is obviously to Eagle Island with the lighthouse, I have included the piece. Where it is obviously to Achill, I have excluded it. Where there is ambiguity, I have included it with a health warning.

Of course, I could have saved myself a lot of bother by referring to it in the Irish – Oilean sa Tuaidh (*the Island in the North*). Thomas Ban O Raghallaigh says the Inniskea islanders (to the south) referred to it as 'Illaunsatuai.' I doubt there are many of that name in Norway or Botswana.

The Spanish Armada

Take heed lest you fall upon the island of Ireland, for fear of the damage that might befall you upon that coast – Duke of Medina-Sidonia, Commander of the Spanish Armada in 1588

As part of the plan to invade England in 1588, the Spanish Armada sailed up the English Channel to Spanish Netherlands (Belgium), where they had arranged to pick up soldiers for the imminent invasion. Not only did the soldiers fail to materialise but the fleet found itself blockaded by English ships. Cutting their anchors loose to escape the English fireships, what remained of the Armada headed up the North Sea, then rounded the top of Scotland, heading for A Coruña and home. Unfortunately, this route led down the west coast of Ireland and, as Medina-Sidonia had warned, much damage befell them. It is thought that Ireland and her notorious weather accounted for up to 24 of the 65 ships lost, several now lying off the Mayo coast.

Records are few and far between regarding these ships. Many never existed in the first place, while many sunk without anybody else knowing they had sunk. (The Spanish Armada was not alone in this. In this period of history, and indeed, until well into the nineteenth century, owners were only made aware of the loss of a ship by its failure to arrive at its destination, and then, only after a reasonable period of time had elapsed.)

It would be fair to say that the Spanish Armada, running for home in ships possibly damaged in their encounter with the English, did not have the best of luck with the weather. And as we shall see, time and time again, the area off the Mullet peninsula can be subject to some of the roughest and unkindest seas in the world.

Due to a previously brisk trade between Spain and the west of Ireland in areas such as viniculture, the Spanish charts of western Ireland were remarkably good for the time. Columbus himself was reputed to have visited Galway one hundred years before and may have heard tales of a land far to the west.

Knowing the reputation of the western Irish seaboard, and heeding their commander's words, the Armada kept a good distance out to sea, giving that savage coastline a wide berth. But fate hadn't finished with them yet and storm after storm conspired to send them careering landwards. The prevailing currents led many of them towards Eagle Island and only when the weather paused for breath were they able to break away, some heading north to Donegal Bay, others south to Galway Bay. Others, possibly badly damaged, opted to seek refuge in Erris.

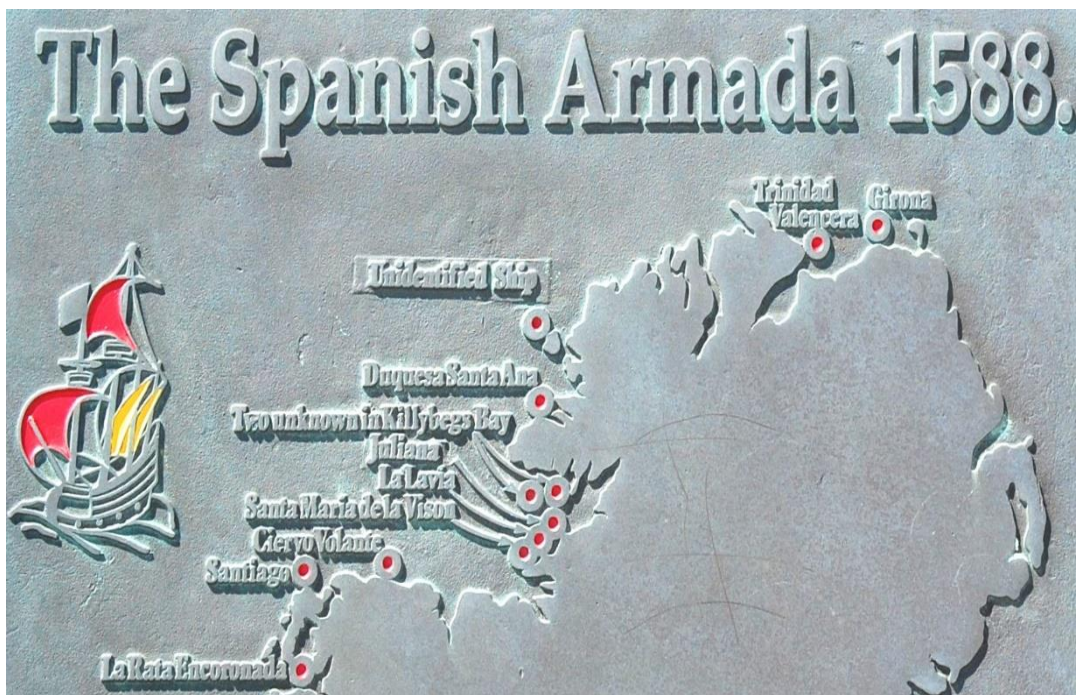
La Rata Santa Maria Encoronada was a carrack with anything up to 500 men on board. As a result of damage, whether incurred in the battle with the English or with the North Mayo Atlantic, she was forced to make for Blacksod Bay where she ran aground at Ballycroy, probably due to her lack of anchors. The ship appeared to have carried some of the sons of the noblest families in Spain. All reached and took over Fahy Castle at Doony, whereupon the ship was torched to avoid it falling into enemy hands. The unpopular landlord of the area did not intervene.

In the meantime, two other ships of the Armada had run for shelter in Blacksod Bay and were at anchor in Elly Bay. They were the *Duguesa Santa Ana* (900 tons, 23 guns and 357 men) and the *Nuestra Senora de Begona* (750 tons, 24 guns and 297 men.)

Under the command of Don Alonso Martinez de Leyva, the crew made its way around Blacksod Bay and joined up with their compatriots. Most of them joined the *Duguesa Santa Ana*. The *Nuestra Senora de Begona* eventually sailed for and reached Spain. The *Duguesa*, however, sailed north to Killybegs Bay where they knew another Spanish ship, the *Girona*, was being repaired. With 1300 men on board, the *Girona* sailed for home but a rudder failure and another violent gale ensued and it sank off the Antrim coast with only nine survivors.

Another Armada vessel, the *San Nicholas*, with an unknown cargo, sank off Erris Head while the 600-ton *Santiago*, equipped with 19 cannon, went down near Inver Point off Pollathomas. Many more went down off south Mayo, Donegal and county Clare. In total, roughly half of the 130 strong fleet failed to return home, the sea around north Mayo accounting for its fair share of the tragedies.

It would not be the last time that the same sea reared up in fury.



Part of the Spanish Armada plaque in Killybegs

The 1830s

There is not so dangerous a shore on the Western Coast of Ireland, as that between Blackrock and Eagle Island – Tom Cringle, Mayo Constitution, 5th October 1835

Construction

In 1830, two commanders of the Coastguard service, Blake and Glascock, who had charge of the revenue cruisers off the west coast of Ireland, and 'others,' petitioned the Ballast Board to alleviate the darkness of the north Mayo seaboard. At the time, there was no light from Clare Island all the way up to Arranmore Island and even the latter was due to be decommissioned as soon as the lighthouse on Tory Island was built. So, the commanders proposed that a light on lonely Blackrock, seven miles off the Mullet peninsula, would be the ideal location.

As an alternative, they suggested Inishmann Point. This may have been slightly disingenuous, as nobody seems to know where Inishmann Point is or was. The suggestion that it may have been on Inishmaan in the Aran Islands does not make geographical sense!

There was a secondary reason, probably not stated in the official memorial, for placing a lighthouse in this area. Like many places around the coast of Ireland, pirates operated with impunity. Woe betide any vessel that suddenly became becalmed off the Inniskeas or in Blacksod Bay for it would quickly become the target of the local, starving natives who would swarm all over it like a plague of locusts. A lighthouse would be another early warning system of the presence of these maritime highwaymen.

It is probable that it was the wreck of the *Maria* on Friday 24th September 1830, and the shocking aftermath, that prompted the memorial from Blake and Glascock.

The *Maria*, a beautiful new brigantine of 194 tons, was on a voyage from Bergen in Norway to Venice, with a cargo of stock fish and other articles. She had taken twenty-eight days to reach Eagle Island. Like so many before and after her, she encountered a gale off the Erris coast and was blown onto a rock in a timber cove beneath the 150 feet cliffs on the shore, where it was smashed to pieces. Of the crew of nine, three were drowned and it was reported by the *Mayo Free Press*, that the remaining six were robbed of the clothes of their backs and whatever possessions they had on them when rescued.

The subsequent story was reported in the *Mayo Free Press*.

An auction was called, by whom we cannot learn, but the sale (of the wreck) took place on Monday, and the mate of the vessel, a foreigner, who did not understand the language or usages of the country, was compelled to act as auctioneer and, when directed, knocked down the entire cargo, sails, spars, hull etc, for £21 to the Rev. Mr. Dawson, a magistrate of Erris, and a Mr. Davis, without the poor foreigner knowing what it meant. So far indeed was the monopoly of this godsend carried that some people who came to make purchases were directed by the rev. magistrate to be gone; that they should get no bargains, and the whole affair terminated in a few minutes... (much to) the dismay of the unfortunate mariners, who found that after the greater part of this sum had been deducted under pretence of salvage, the entire proceeds of the cargo and vessel amounted to a few shillings... The wreck took place on a Saturday morning – those who survived were

plundered – the auction was called – the cargo sold – and the unfortunate strangers dismissed, all within forty-eight hours.

It is a small relief to know that a collection by the citizens of Westport raised the sum of £30 for the mariners and the lovely Rev. Mr. Dawson was relieved of his position of magistrate.

The son of the local landowner, Major Bingham, was also found to be complicit in the deceit and he too was relieved of his magistrate duties. This prompted a bitter feud between the Major and the local Catholic priest Fr. Lyons, which resulted in a libel case.

According to the papers at the time, the case against Bingham was hard and fast but the papers praised Fr. Lyons too much and he was forced to protest some of the things that had been written about him. He had not, he said, caused the roads to be built in Erris; they were there already prior to his arrival in 1825. *You also state*, he said in a letter to the *Pilot* published 2nd January 1834, *that I prevailed upon the government to erect a lighthouse, and that I protected the erection of it, which (you say) required all my influence, for the people considered its erection as depriving them of a principal source of subsistence. To this, I have to say that the lighthouses you allude to are just now in process of being built by the Ballast Board of Dublin – that the people of Erris offered no opposition or obstruction whatsoever to their erection – and that the only way in which I was instrumental in the building of them was by strong representations of the necessity for them to the government and to Lloyd's committees, both in Liverpool and London.* He also went on to repudiate the reports that the people of Erris had sometimes resorted to wrecking and murder in order to garner the harvests of shipwrecks.

Whether the wreck of the *Maria* played a part in Blake and Glascock's representations or not, the Ballast Board duly handed over the memorial to their chief inspector, George Halpin, and asked him to report on the matter. Halpin, who had practically hauled the lighthouse service kicking and screaming into the nineteenth century, duly undertook a tour of inspection and recommended that Eagle Island was the more suitable location for a light, rather than the fictitious Inishmann Point.

(The Ballast Board was the name more commonly used when referring to the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin, who had been given control in 1810 for maintaining and developing the lighthouse service around the coasts of Ireland. In 1867, the organisation split into two. One part devoted itself to the port of Dublin; the other became the Commissioner of Irish Lights.)

The Board informed Admiral Paget, through whom the application was made, that Eagle Island had been selected as the most suitable location. They then had to go through the politics of 'obtaining sanction' from the Elder Brethren of Trinity House, which duly arrived in a letter to the Ballast Board secretary John Cossert.

*Trinity House, London
27th December 1830*

Sir,

I have brought under the consideration of the Elder Brethren of this Corporation your letter of the 9th inst., transmitting, by direction of the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin, copies of sundry communications with respect to the erection

of Light Houses on the Western Coast of Ireland and signifying that, after giving subject due consideration, that Corporation deems it expedient to erect a Light House on Sline Head (sic) and another on Eagle Island, as recommended by the Inspector, upon which measures, they request the concurrence of this Board.

And I have it therefore in command to acquaint you for the Information of the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin, that the Elder Brethren, having attentively considered the communications adverted to, and the Report of Mr. Halpin, the Inspector of Light Houses, concur in opinion that it is desirable that Light Houses should be erected on Sline Head and upon Eagle Island, as suggested in the Report of that official.

I am directed to add that the Elder Brethren concur with Inspector in opinion that the two Lights proposed to be exhibited on Sline Head should be revolving, and those upon the Eagle Island fixed lights – but they beg to suggest that, in determining the sites of the proposed Light Houses, it is desirable that in respect of those upon Eagle Island, their line of bearing, when in one, should lead vessels clear of Blackrock; and that the line of bearing of those upon Sline Head, when in one, should lead vessels clear of all rocks or shoals to the Northward or Southward of the Headland.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your very humble servant,

J. Herbert

One presumes that Mr. Halpin, being a superbly competent engineer, (though amazingly without any formal training on the subject) had already thought through the idea of the two lights lining up to clear a nasty stretch of rocks lying just off the north-western shore of the Mullet peninsula. But, of course, Trinity House had to be seen to be proactive in the matter, rather than simply nodding and saying, *Yup*.

John Cossert, the Secretary of the Ballast Board, then forwarded a copy of this letter to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and also to the Board of Trade, both of whom were to be consulted on any outlay of public money. It is wryly amusing to notice, 190 years later, that J.C. made the same mistake that millions of us have done and will continue to do by forgetting, through habit, to change the year when writing the covering note on 1st January.

Having two lights also differentiated the station from others in the vicinity. Transatlantic vessels, after maybe spending weeks at sea and not being able to take a proper fix by the stars in bad weather, would need to readily determine what part of the European coastline they were approaching from the characteristic of the light displayed. Hence, the stress on the different characteristics by Trinity House, which Halpin had already doubtless proposed.

As can be seen, as well as Eagle Island, sanction had been sought and received to erect two lighthouses on Emmill Island at Slyne Head, on the northernmost point of Galway Bay. The first matter on the agenda was to find out who owned the two islands and to purchase the land from them. There were other legal niceties to sort out too – was their anybody living there and did anybody have a potential claim to the islands? As was the custom in those days, a commission was set up to hear memorials from all interested parties and a press release was issued, advising that this commission, and this commission only, had the power to pay compensation. This press release dated 24th July 1831 also noted that the

island was *in the possession or occupation of, William Ivers*. The commission for Eagle Island, they declared, would meet at Westport on 15th August 1831 to hear petitions from all interested parties. The Slyne Head commission would convene at Galway four days later.

There were eight Dublin men on the team, all members of the Ballast Board. They were Nathaniel Sneyd, William Peter Lunell, Thomas Wilson, Thomas Crosthwait, George Frederick Brooke, Robert Orr, George Roe and George Dewar. As part of the service, this esteemed octet hosted a 'sumptuous dinner' at Robinson's Hotel in Westport at the start of the week of the inquiry. Also in attendance were the Sheriff (John Bourke) and the jury, as well as invited guests and interested parties.

It may be helpful at this stage to transcribe part of a long question and answer session that found its way into the Minutes of Evidence of the Select Committee on Lighthouses three years later, as it gives an indication of how the process worked.

Ballast-master of the Ballast Board, - to give him his official title - William Bigger, was required to appear before the Committee, which was convened in England, to inquire into the financial workings of the three lighthouse boards – Trinity House (England,) The Northern Lighthouse Board (Scotland and the Isle of Man) and the Ballast Board (Ireland). Although the three boards worked autonomously, this was the start of what Irish Lights historian Frank Pelly calls *The Political Period*, during which the Irish and Scottish boards could not be seen to be doing anything better than their English counterpart!

So poor Mr. Bigger was hauled in over several days and questions were fired at him, often non-sequentially. This is just a tiny part of the exchange:

Q. On Eagle Island, can you state what was paid to the proprietors of the island for leave to erect the lighthouse?

A. No, I cannot now.

Q. Are you aware that £400 was paid to them and can you state why?

A. I cannot; the corporation may have obtained the ground that they required by inquisition.

Q. Will you state how that is done?

A. It is a precept issued to the sheriff of the county to impanel a jury in the county in which the ground is situate; it must be attended by three members of the corporation who preside, and the jury which is so impanelled ascertain the value to be paid for the ground.

Q. Is that by act of Parliament?

A. It is.

Q. Are you aware what the amount of law expenses was in Eagle Island?

A. No, I do not recollect; whatever they were, I must have paid it.

Q. Who was your law agent?

A. Mr. Goddard.

Q. Is he a director?

A. No.

Q. Is he any relation of a director?

A. He is a relative of a director.

Q. Is Mr. Cossert, the secretary, also a relative of a director?

A. He is.

Q. And some of the directors are your relations, are they not?

A. The late Mr. Cossert was my uncle by marriage, the present Mr. Cossert is my first cousin.

Q. Is there any ground attached to the house at Eagle Island beyond the ground necessary to the building?

A. I cannot say how much. There must be some.

Q. Will you send the Committee a statement of the purchase-money paid as compensations to the proprietors for all those new lights of which you are to send an account; and also an account of the law expenses attending each, and the quantity of land belonging and attached to the lighthouses?

A. I will report the desire to the Board.

It should be noted that, whereas Mr. Bigger was grilled over the alleged expenditure of £400 for the purchase of a small island, less than ten years later, Trinity House coughed up over £170,000 to 're-purchase' the Smalls lighthouse in Wales from private lessees.

On the other hand, it was a sizable amount compared to some of the other land purchases for lighthouses at the time. Slyne Head was obtained for £210; Oyster Island (or part thereof) at the entrance to Sligo harbour cost £320; land at Ferris Point on the south side of Larne harbour set the Corporation back a miserly £117 in 1834, while the cost of purchasing a rock in the Shannon plus one acre on land for Tarbert lighthouse was £210. Evidently, due note was taken of the loss of income to the incumbent owners and lessors – the value of the land on Skellig Michael was mainly determined by the loss of the annual harvest of puffin feathers!

So, as we have seen, the jury convened in Westport on 15th August 1831 and put a value of £400 on the island. This sum was then allocated as follows: -

- £200 to Denis Bingham
- 1 shilling to William H. Carter
- £99 19s to G.F. Brooke and Michael Harris (trustees to Wm. H. Carter)
- £100 for his interest under lease to William Ivers.

(Far be it for me to allege a conflict of interests. It is surely a pure coincidence that G.F. Brooke should be a trustee for Wm Carter and a George Frederick Brooke should be a member of the Ballast Board group assessing the compensation claims.)

From the above division, Eagle Island had been jointly owned by Denis Bingham and William Carter (possibly a minor) and that William Ivers had leased the island from William Carter's share.

It is difficult to know what Ivers wanted with Eagle Island, given the difficulty of landing thereon. There is a suggestion that maybe he wanted to graze sheep on it or maybe harvest seaweed. It may be that he had simply leased large tracts of Erris of which Eagle Island was just a tiny and insignificant part.

To explain who the people who owned Eagle Island were, we need to go back a couple of centuries.

In the 1660s, Sir James Shaen, Surveyor-General of Ireland, purchased much of Erris from a London goldsmith named Robert Viner, who had received them from Charles II in lieu of payment of a debt.

Shaen's son, Arthur, inherited the land, said to total 95,000 acres and, in turn, passed the lands on to his two daughters. One daughter, Frances, married Sir John Bingham of

Newbrook, county Mayo in 1738; the other, Susannah, married Henry Boyle Carter of Castle Martin, county Kildare in 1750.

Both families were absentee landlords until the end of the eighteenth century when Major Bingham arrived in town. Well, there weren't actually any towns. Belmullet was just a few buildings on a small street. Denis decided to build his own town, a vanity project designed to support the needs of the large country pile he was building at, yes, Binghamstown.

In order to put Binghamstown on the map, the Major ordered a road to be built from Castlebar, which took an age to be constructed. Not only that but when it finally got to the Mullet, it naturally connected Belmullet to the outside world long before it reached Binghamstown and Belmullet was owned by the Carter family!

Attempting to strike a blow for Binghamstown, Dirty Den then organised for a fair to be held there on the first of every month. When Belmullet organised a rival fair, he built a large wall and a big gate and charged access for farmers who preferred to sell their produce at Belmullet. The great gate translates as *An Geata Mor*, which is the common Irish term for Binghamstown today.

William Ivers was a local bigwig merchant and magistrate in Belmullet, which implies he was leasing the island from the Carters rather than the Bingham.

The legal niceties now out of the way, work could begin on the construction of the lighthouses and dwellings.

There are very few records surviving that relate to the building phase of the two light stations. The rock used for the construction was to be quarried on the island itself which made perfect sense from a logistical point of view, although it is said that some of it may have come from Dun Laoghaire aka Kingstown, where a quarry was hard at work providing stone for the new harbour there. Gerry Sweeney says the capstones for the storm wall were made of Aberdeen granite.

Presumably huts for the accommodation of the workforce would have to have been constructed first to enable the men to remain on the island overnight. With the capriciousness of the surrounding ocean, that negated the risk of being stranded on the rock without shelter and also of being unable to return to work in the morning.

The shipping news section of the newspapers contained regular news of tenders leaving Dublin port bound for Eagle Island with either a 'general cargo' or 'Ballast Office stores.' The *Francis*, under Captain Davis sailed in May 1832; the *Benjamin Nicholson* under Captain McCowan left in May 1833 and so on.

There is a letter in the *Mayo Constitution* of 26th November 1835 that sheds an interesting light on the logistical problem of landing goods on Eagle Island. It is written by a certain Tom Cringle (probably not his real name) in response to two previous correspondents called Jack Navigator and Tom Fearnought (even less likely to be their real names) regarding the debate around where on the west coast of Ireland, the transatlantic steam packet companies should make their hub. Blacksod was advocated by Messrs Fearnought and Navigator but Westport, Galway, Limerick and Valentia were also being touted.

Dismissing Blacksod, Cringle was less bounteous and generous than his brother Kris.

Perhaps one of those famed writers, he began, the sarcasm dripping from his pen, *can inform the public what became of a schooner that discharged a cargo at French-port, for*

the use of Eagle Island light-house, the winter before last. She sailed from thence for Black Sod, in the charge of a pilot named Randal McDonnell, and was seen at sunset off the South Island of Inniskea, at the entrance of Black Sod; but a gale came on and neither pilot, ship or crew were ever heard of more. They have laboured hard to convince the public that there are no obstacles in entering their bay; yet, this was a case where a vessel had really the best pilot of their neighbourhood on board; yet he was unable to enter either Black Sod or Broad Haven, although sailing from a place immediately between those far-famed harbours.

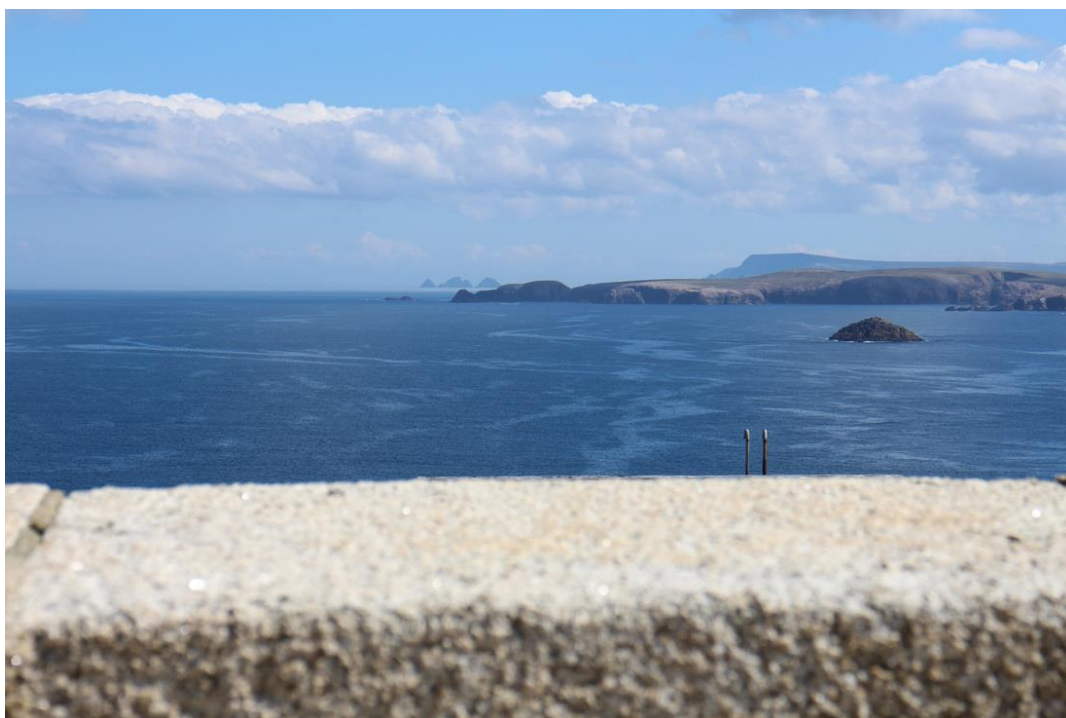
So, we are told that the schooner discharged its cargo at Frenchport, rather than at Scotchport or even Eagle Island itself and it would not be unreasonable to assume that this was the norm for most of the tenders. Scotchport was the embarkation point of choice for the lighthouse tender from the establishment of the light until the helicopter took over in 1969. It is a small bay with a narrow entrance and consequently relatively sheltered.

Frenchport, or Portnafrankagh, a short way to the south was much larger but difficult to access in anything approaching moderate weather due to the heavy swells. There is no pier shown in the First Edition Ordnance Survey map at Frenchport. Presumably, these early lighthouse tenders anchored on the northern side of the bay and discharged their loads to smaller local boats to bring ashore and later out to the rock.

Although the seas were just as rough, if not rougher, the transport of provisions to and from the building site seems to have run a lot more smoothly at Eagle Island, rather than at Slyne Head. One man was drowned at the latter station in 1833 while transporting stores while, just before the establishment of the light, eight men lost their lives when their boat overturned while on a lighthouse mission. Thankfully, no such tragedy – that we are aware of – occurred at Eagle.

When viewed from the Mullet shoreline, it appears that Eagle Island is long and thin, running roughly in a north-south delineation. In fact, it is more match-box shaped. The two lighthouses that you see span the narrower width of the island, and this is the width that is furthest away from you. The longer sides of the island actually stretch from the two lighthouses towards you, if slightly tilted from say WNW to ESE.

So, in reality, the two lights should have been called Eagle Island West and Eagle Island Northeast. It is clear that the tower on the left, the West Tower, is at a higher elevation, than the ruin of its counterpart on the right. But the original East tower was much taller, in order to bring about synchronicity of the lights on the same focal plane. Or in other words, the lights shone at the same elevation, despite the fact that the West tower was built further up the hill. They were 132 yards (120m) apart and the lights were both on the same focal plane of 220 feet (67m) above sea level. The East Tower was 87 feet high, tall and slender, while the West Light, on the highest spot, was a short and dumpy 44 feet tall.



View from Eagle looking north to Erris Head with the famous Stags of Broadhaven in the distance (photo by Dave Horkan 2015)

The notion of having two lights at a station to differentiate it from neighbouring lights was not a new one. Nidingen in the Baltic Sea exhibited two lights as early as 1624 to distinguish it from Anholt.² In Ireland, Wicklow Head had an upper and a lower light from 1788, not only to differentiate it from other lights along the coast but also to lead vessels through the ‘swash’ in the offshore sandbanks. Skellig Michael had two lights, as did the Maidens off the Antrim coast. The fact that Slyne Head was also to get a second light may have been seen as overkill but the character of the two lights at that station – one revolving and one fixed – was enough to mark it out from the two fixed lights of Eagle Island.

When the two lights of Eagle Island were kept in line, they led three miles to the seaward side of Blackrock – which was still nearly thirty years away from establishing a lighthouse of its own – and, the other way, would lead 2.5 miles to the seaward side of the Stags of Broadhaven, a series of nasty rocks off the North Mayo coastline. And they would also avoid all the hidden, sunken, ship-busting rocks in between. The lights could be seen for twenty miles in good weather.

The lights were first-order catoptric, a system of illumination that meant that the light was magnified by paraboloid plates made of heavily silvered copper. So high was the proportion of silver in the copper that the cloths used to clean the plates were stored away so that the silver particles could be recovered from them at a later stage.

² *Lighthouses – Their Architecture, History and Archaeology* by Douglas B. Hague and Rosemary Christie

Some lighthouses were built by local contractors but many more were built by a regular lighthouse workforce, employed by the Ballast Board, who toured Ireland, working their magic on some of the most inhospitable islands and headlands imaginable. This was an example of the latter, although doubtless many local labourers would have been employed. This would have been a tremendous boost to the locals, whose wretched plight had long been ignored by the Bingham and Carters.

The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage has described the West lighthouse as follows: -

Freestanding single-bay two-stage lighthouse, sanctioned 1830; built 1836; extant 1838, on a circular plan. (Spoiler alert!) Damaged, 1850. "Improved", 1895. Electrified, 1968. Automated, 1988. One of a pair. Rendered battered walls on cut-granite chamfered plinth with cantilevered walkway on cut-granite thumbnail beaded corbels supporting cast-iron "Serpentine" railings centred on lantern on repointed granite ashlar battered base. Square-headed door opening approached by two steps with concealed dressings framing timber door. Square-headed window openings with cut-granite sills, and concealed dressings framing fixed-pane fittings. Interior retaining cantilevered cut-granite spiral staircase with wrought iron balusters supporting wrought iron banister terminating in volute. Set in shared grounds on outcrop with limewashed battered boundary wall to perimeter.

It goes on to say that the lighthouse is attributable on stylistic grounds to George Halpin Senior, the Inspector for the Ballast Board, and cites its gently tapering silhouette and the curvilinear iron work encircling the lantern as evidence for this. The towers of the lighthouses were painted white.

In the very early days of lighthouses in Britain and Ireland, there had been two keepers on duty at every rock station but, since the well-documented case of the Smalls lighthouse off the coast of Wales where a keeper had to keep safe the body of his deceased compatriot, lest it was thought that he had been murdered, three had always been the magic number. This did not apply to rock stations with more than one light though. Thus, both Eagle Island East and West were fitted out with two cottages for the keepers and their families, making four keepers on the island.

The 1841 Census, though, indicates that there were seven dwelling houses at the station. Presumably the three surplus cottages had been used during the construction for the workers. This was reduced to six dwelling houses by 1851 and then to the minimum four from 1861 to 1891.

The sea, though, did not go quietly. During the construction, a massive storm swept away the two storeys of the West (higher) tower that had been built, along with much of the equipment and materials. It was a gentle nudge, a reminder, that constructing a lighthouse did not mean the sea had been tamed and indeed the many wrecks off the island in the years to come show that a light can do only so much.

Maybe as a result of this early warning – or maybe it was already in the plans – a massive storm wall was constructed between the two lights. It was three feet thick and twenty feet high and built on the seaward side of the lighthouse. But even this Great Wall of Eagle could not offer complete protection from the raging sea, as we shall see in later chapters.

There was a curious incident on the mainland during the time that the light stations were being built that may have a link with Eagle Island. On the night of the Binghamstown Fair on 1st April 1833, somebody fired a shot through the open window of the local Catholic

priest, Fr. John Patrick Lyons who, we have already seen, was probably not on Major Bingham's Christmas card list. Prompted by a large reward, a witness came forward and named two men, Edward Lavelle and Daniel McCoy, as the perpetrators of the attack.

Horried, Daniel's father went to Eagle Island and brought his son back and made him surrender to the police. Daniel was then charged with attempted murder and the witness was brought in to identify him. When confronted, the witness said he hadn't meant *Daniel* McCoy. He'd meant his brother Michael McCoy.

Meanwhile, on hearing that Daniel had been charged, Michael went into the station and surrendered himself and the witness identified him. Needless to say, the case was thrown out of court.

It is probable that Daniel McCoy was a part of the workforce working on the Eagle Island lighthouses. Although it was a Ballast Office team in charge, many locals would have been delighted with a spot of work, loading and unloading, fetching, carrying, digging etc, basically the unskilled work that all large construction projects need.

There is, of course, the possibility that the Eagle Island in question was Achill Island, aka Eagle Island, as the nature of Daniel's work is not alluded to. It is of course a long, long way to Achill from Binghamstown and I suspect Daniel was one of the boys who built the lighthouses.

In September 1834, the workers at the lighthouse received a surprise visit from Lieutenant General Sir Richard Hussey Vivian, 1st Baron Vivian GCB GCH PC PC (Ire) FRS, although all the letters after his name were transported to the island in a smaller boat. A fawning *Western Impartial Reporter* reported that the highly decorated veteran of Waterloo was very particular in his inquiries and minute in his observations, which doubtless motivated the lighthouse workers to greater efforts.

Frank Pelly, former Irish Lights archivist, tells a story about the foreman on the Eagle Island construction site. The foreman was a man of great power. He could hire and fire and, apparently, he was not averse to taking kickbacks. If you work for me, you give me a portion of your wages. Halpin, says Frank, heard about this and recommended that the foreman be brought to the assizes at Westport to answer the charges. But, he added, being a scrupulously fair man, that the Ballast Board should pay for his legal defence. Frank says he doesn't know the outcome but Halpin's recommendations were normally good enough for the board.

A few months before the lighthouses were established, a Dublin coal merchant, George Lawlor, was hauled before the Lord Mayor of Dublin by the Ballast Office commissioners on a charge of substituting Chester River coal for the superior Whitehaven coal in an order for the Eagle Island lighthouse. The Lord Mayor announced that he had received information that a number of vessels on the dock were discharging coal without the cargo being properly labelled, as per the law. Consequently, he organised a surprise inspection of all coal ships and the masters of those who were non-compliant were each fined £1 1s 8d, as a warning to others. Unfortunately, there is no record of what happened to Mr. Lawlor.

P. Knight in his 1836 classic *Erris in the Irish Highlands and the Atlantic Railway*, obviously sought out the Ballast Board for a description of the new lighthouses. He was given a formal statement by George Halpin junior, who had been co-opted onto the Ballast Board team to help Dad with his workload. Junior, himself, was actually a qualified engineer and

his role in lighthouse construction may have been underestimated in comparison with his indefatigable father.



Aerial view of the island (photo by Joe McCabe)

The statement read: *Eagle Island, a rocky island off the Mullet of Erris. Distant from the Stags of Broadhaven, eleven sea miles; from Achill Head, nineteen miles. presents a steep cliff to the western ocean; slopes away shoreward with shelving rocks. It is in size nearly eleven acres and covered by sufficient pasture to support from two to three dozen sheep; purchased by the Ballast Office from Major Bingham and W.H. Carter Esq. Two lights will be so placed on this island as to form marks for clearing all danger North and South. Proposed height of light over the sea, 220 feet.* As statements went, it was not particularly exciting but at least it avoided all the fluff. Speaking of which, sheep were actually introduced on the island.

The lights were ready long before the ancillary work had been completed but the Ballast Board decided to open for business anyway. The *Notice to Mariners* was issued nearly five months before the announced date of establishment and the two lights were first lit at dusk on the 29th September 1835.

NOTICE TO MARINERS.
EAGLE ISLAND LIGHT-HOUSES.

THE Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin, &c., hereby give Notice, that **TWO LIGHT-HOUSES** have been **ERECTED** on *Eagle Island*, off the West Coast of Ireland, from which Two fixed bright Lights will be exhibited on the Evening of the 29th of September, 1833, and thenceforth will be lighted from Sun-set to Sun-rise.

Specification given of the Position, &c. of the Towers, by Mr. Halpin, Inspector of Irish Light-Houses.

Eagle Island, situate off the N. W. Coast of Erris, County of Mayo, bears by Compass,

from: The Stags of Broadhaven,	West.	dist.	11	Sea Miles
" Erris Head, ..	West.	"	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	do.
" W. Point of South Inniskea Island	N. E. by E.	"	11 $\frac{1}{2}$	do.
" The Black Rock, ..	E. N. E. $\frac{1}{4}$ N.	"	14 $\frac{1}{2}$	do.
" Achil Head, ..	N. E. $\frac{1}{4}$ E.	"	19	do.

The Two Lights on *Eagle Island* bear from each other E. by N.—S. by W. and kept in a line with lead 3 Miles to seaward of the Black Rock, and 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Miles seaward of the Stags of Broadhaven, and clear of all outlying Rocks between Blacksod Bay and Broadhaven.

The Lanterns are elevated 220 feet over the level of high water mark, and are not illuminated landward from E. by S. to S. by W. } W. By Order,
HENRY VEREKER, Sec.
Ballast Office, Dublin, 7th May, 1833.

By the end of 1839, when the building work was deemed complete, the cost of the entire station was £36,418-10s-1d.

Stormy seas

Lloyd's List reported on the 11th April 1837 that a large Vessel drifted by Eagle Island 4th inst., apparently a total wreck; boats have gone out to her.

On the 29th October 1837, the *Vine*, under Captain Cromarty, put into the Isle of Islay in Scotland. It had been travelling from the Orkneys to Limerick and had experienced a violent gale and rough sea to the north-west of Eagle Island. It had lost its bulwark, stanchions and other miscellanea – *Morning Gazette*, Thursday 9th November 1837

The schooner, *Favourite*, with stores for the Eagle Island lighthouse, was blown from her anchors on 30th October, evidently in the same storm system that damaged the *Vine*, above. She ran onto the rocks on the east side of Frenchport harbour. Captain Stone decided that it was necessary to scuttle the vessel in order to keep her easy until the next spring tide, when it was hoped she would get off – *Connaught Telegraph* Wednesday 8th November 1837

The *Eagle* lost a man by the name of Bolger, who fell overboard off Eagle Island, on 1st April 1839. The deceased was a native of Kilrush and fell from the fore-top-sail yard – *Limerick Chronicle* Saturday 13th April 1839

On Tuesday 26th November 1839, it was reported from Belmullet that the *Anna Carlotta*, under Captain Lilo was *at anchor off Eagle Island in a dangerous position*, although the crew had come ashore. Considering it was on a journey from Gamla Karleby (in present day Finland) to Cette (modern-day Sète, on the French Mediterranean), it would also have been in a very strange position – *Morning Post* Saturday 30th November 1839.

(On the 4th December, it was reported in *The Globe*, that this ship, suddenly calling itself the *Catharine Charlotte*, had been assisted into Blacksod Bay with the loss of its anchors, topgallant masts, cables etc.)

It is perhaps unusual that no shipwrecks were reported off Eagle Island after the Big Wind on 6th January 1839. Probably Ireland's most severe weather event of the past 200 years, the north of the country was flattened by a terrifying, hurricane-force wind that caused widespread destruction throughout the country. It was so bad that maybe ordinary wrecks with no loss of life were not thought important enough to mention.

The Keepers

Keeper	Year
Anthony Hicks	mid-1830s
Peter Page snr	late 1830s

With the two lights established in 1835, it was time for the four keepers and their families to take up residence. They would have landed up in Belmullet with their wives and children in tow and obtained transportation along the dirt road to Scotchport. From there, they would have piled into a small boat, rowed by six strong local men, who probably had no word of English, and then been dumped unceremoniously on the stone pier on the island. They would then have had to haul bag and baggage – if it had arrived – up the hill to the lighthouse, doubtless wondering how they were going to survive for years on those desolate fourteen acres.

By a fortuitous report twenty-four years later, we can at least make a pretty good guess that one of the first keepers on the station was a man called **Anthony Hicks**.

In 1859, the three lighthouse boards in Ireland and Britain were requested to report on the state of the lights under their control. Templates were sent out and a steamship, *Vivid*, carried inspectors to several light stations on the east and north coasts of Ireland and some stations in Wales and Scotland. They interviewed the keepers about length of service, conditions, oil lamps, lightning conductors, information which then went into the final report.

For the most part, the keepers were not named but, on the Maidens, and at Inishowen, they were. The keeper at the latter was Anthony Hicks.

He was, he said, thirty-four years in the service, the last twenty-two of which had been spent at Inishowen. Prior to that, he had served on Cape Clear and Eagle Island and, in his younger days, had been a printer in Dublin. He was married with grown-up daughters, who helped him out at the lighthouse, which only had one keeper assigned to it. If he had the chance to retire, he would.

Robert Calwell of the Ballast Board kept a list of keepers at each of the lighthouses from 1862 to 1867. He lists Anthony's age in 1862 as 69 years of age and his previous stations as the Copeland Isles, Old Head of Kinsale, Cape Clear and Eagle Island. The order of Calwell's 'previous stations' is almost always chronological, so Eagle Island would have been the one prior to Inishowen.

Cape Clear light was established in 1818 but Eagle Island only came on board in 1835. If Anthony had been twenty-two years at Inishowen, he must have arrived there during 1837, give or take a year. He must therefore have gone from Cape Clear to Eagle Island in the mid-1830s. As corroboration of this, we find, courtesy the *Newry Telegraph* of 22nd June 1837, that one Anthony Hicks, on the suggestion of the Reverend W.P. Dawson of Tarmoncara had contributed five shillings to an appeal to send clothing and funds to the destitute in the highlands and islands of Scotland.

Anthony was superannuated from Inishowen in 1863 at the age of 70 years after 38 years in the service. He died in February 1867.

It may be pertinent to mention that another old keeper, Joshua Redmond, who had spent seventeen years on the Skelligs without once visiting the mainland, had married a Margaret Hicks in Dublin in 1819. It could well be that she was Anthony's sister and both were children of an even older lightkeeper. Anthony had married a Mary Corcoran, also in Dublin, the previous year.

One of the grown-up daughters was called Jane Hicks and, no offence to the other daughters, I mention her for one reason only. Jane married one Robert Davenport in 1866 in Moville, county Donegal, a year before her father died and, shortly afterwards, they emigrated to Boston, Massachusetts. It was not a happy move. They had three young children, all of whom died. Her husband, Robert died in 1872 and Jane followed six years later.

The point is, and I'm well aware that it is not an exact science, but the census record and Jane's age at death both give her year of birth as being 1836. If this is one, or even two years out, then she would have been born on Eagle Island and may well have been the first person to have achieved this feat.

According to the Calwell list for Inishowen East, **Peter Page** was sixty years old in June 1862 and had been in the service for thirty-two years. Prior to joining the lighthouse service, he had been a bookbinder. Aside from his daughter Ann, who became the Female Assistant at the station in April 1866, two sons of his, Charles and Peter had become lightkeepers. Peter Óg would, in time, become principal keeper at Eagle Island.

The 1859 *Cruise of the Vivid* report described Peter as 'intelligent.'

Calwell listed Peter senior's previous stations as The Maidens, Eagle Island, Wicklow Head and Hook and again there are no dates but it appears that Harriet, Maria and Charles were born at Larne from 1833 to 1836 (when Peter was on the Maidens); Peter Edward was born in Mayo in 1839 (when he was on Eagle) and William, Ann and Frances were born in Wicklow in the early 1840s. This would narrow Peter's stint on Eagle Island to 1836 – 40 and would also provide another possible Eagle Island birth in Peter junior.

As Peter senior does not appear on the Irish Lights list of keepers with over twenty years' service in 1870, it seems logical to assume he retired in the last few years of the 1860s. He died in Ramelton co. Donegal in 1891 aged 89 years.

One person who had applied for the job on Eagle Island, back in 1832 was James Keane, a former Royal Navy seaman, originally from the West of Ireland but living in Dublin at the time.

*To his Excellency, the Marquis of Anglesey,
General and General Governor of Ireland.*

*The Petition of James Keane, late seaman of His Majesty's Ship, Gloucester,
Sheweth*

Most humbly and respectfully that your most Noble Excellency's Petitioner has had the Honor of being employed in His Majesty's Naval Service for a number of years as will appear from the enclosed vouchers of character and Servitude.

That your Noble Excellency's Petitioner is now in a very distressed and precarious Situation, owing to many domestic misfortunes which it is needless to Submit for your Noble Excellency's Consideration, they being too tedious to relate.

And that misfortunate Petitioner does most mercifully implore your Royal Excellency to give him an appointment to the Light House Station being about to be erected on Eagle Island, Broad Haven, county of Mayo or the Coast Guard Service, as Petitioner has been bred and born in that neighbourhood and has a particular Knowledge of the Island and Surrounding Coast and Seas.

Most fervent prayer, I do most devoutly implore the Great Father of Mercy to watch over and protect your Royal Excellency and against thy name in the column of His Will may Everlasting Peace and happiness be written.

I have the Honour of subscribing myself Your Royal Excellency's Most Humbly Devoted Servant,

James Keane

September 7th 1832

141, Church Street, Dublin

One week later, Mr Keane wrote to the Marquis again, reiterating his request but reminding him to send back his letters of recommendation.

*To his most noble Excellency, the Marquis of Anglesey,
General and General Governor of Ireland,
Dublin Castle*

Most humbly sheweth

That your Noble Excellency's Petitioner was necessitated through the most abject poverty to submit a petition dated the 7th ult., with his character and discharge enclosed in it, foraging(?) an appointment in the Coastguard Service or on Eagle Island lighthouse in the West of Ireland. Petitioner further begs leave to state to your most noble Excellency that the enclosed vouchers are the only means of support that poor Petitioner has for himself and family. And does most mercifully beseech your Royal Excellency to have them forwarded to him by Your Excellency's humane consideration. And in compliance, Petitioner shall in duty bound ever Pray.

I have the honour of remaining Your Noble Excellency's most humble servant
James Keane,
65, Middle Church Street,
September 14th, 1832

The fact that James had given two different addresses a week apart may simply have been an unfortunate coincidence, but I doubt it would have helped his application. In the early days of lightkeeping, new lightkeepers were indeed plucked from the pensioned ranks of the naval service. Robert Wilson on Inis Mór in 1818 had been a lieutenant in the marines; John Hinton at Mutton Island in the 1820s had been a non-commissioned officer; and there were several more, but invariably from the officer class. Poor James, in all probability, didn't get a look in. Not that the Marquis cared. These letters were simply forwarded to the Ballast Board.

With lighthouses springing up around the country, the Ballast Board had certain criteria when it came to appointing new keepers.

The obvious one was the son of a lightkeeper or a coastguard. Such a person would have grown up at or near lighthouses, doubtless had helped his father from an early age and knew very well the loneliness and hardship that the job entailed. It was a no-brainer.

The second person that sometimes got into the job was the tradesman who already worked for the Ballast Board. Working in the stores or on the buoys or on the tenders, his character and suitability would already have been assessed and favourably (or otherwise) reported on by his supervisor.

There was also the retired naval officer, as seen above. They were used to hardship and had disciplined minds, both traits valuable in a keeper's armoury.

And finally, it was sometimes the case that one of the construction team who had worked on building a lighthouse was given the job of minding it once established. This was truer of the smaller lights where one person might suffice. They would be appointed some time before the light was established, when the last stages of the lighthouse were going up in order to keep an eye on things. Walter Walsh had worked on Mutton Island and was appointed keeper there in 1817, a year before the light was established. Part of his pre-light work entailed preventing the stone from being pilfered by locals.

As James does not appear to fit into any of these categories, I unfortunately suspect that his plaintive and suitably fawning application was unsuccessful.

One man who may well have been one of the first four keepers was a man called **Anthony Devitt**. He is listed in an 1844 Ballast Board pension report as being thirty-eight years old when he was *disabled at Eagle Island*. From the 18th November 1837, which was quite possibly the date of the accident, he received the standard £6 6s per annum that was paid to adult pensioners. He was still receiving this amount in an 1859 pensions report. Unfortunately, neither report gives details as to whether he was a keeper, a tradesman or a member of the boat tender. As the Ballast Board accounts for 1837 show that a sum of £3,450 was spent on the two Eagle Island lights for the year – over five times more than Cape Clear, say – it would indicate that work was still being undertaken at the station. Though quite probably, not very safely.



Aerial view of the West station 2023 (photo by Joe McCabe)

The 1830s

On the night of 17th January 1836, less than five months after the lights were first exhibited, the lantern of the West tower was struck by a rock, shattering one of the panes of glass and extinguishing the light, but the keepers had the light working again within an hour. The keepers' dwellings, which of course also housed their families, were badly damaged.

A tidal wave in the seas off Erris in 1869 prompted a letter to the *Mayo Constitution* from a person called 'Traveller.'

As the tidal wave has done no damage, he wrote, an account of the one that struck Eagle Island in 1837 may interest your readers, as I give it from the statement of the light keepers soon after...

Eagle Island light is about 220 feet over the sea, the lightkeepers' houses being close to the tower, built at an elevation of 190 feet; while the island, containing a few acres, lowers to a height of about 90 feet on the land side. An ocean wave (there being no hurricane at the time) with its mass of green water swept over the island, the lightkeepers with their families taking refuge in the tower, just in time to save their lives, when the roofs of the dwelling houses were carried away, and some of the walls, as well as the cows, sheep and pigs on the island, with most of the soil. The roll of dark waters continued for some time

over the rock. The keepers saw the wave coming which must have been caused by a violent gale at a distance.

The sea to crush in the slating must have risen at least 250 feet; I did not hear of any injury having been done to the mainland.

Although Traveller says the storm happened in 1837, it is almost certainly the same event as the one on 17th January 1836. A rude awakening for the island's first permanent inhabitants indeed. In 1876, what appears to be the same correspondent repeats the tale of the storm, only adding poultry to the list of animals swept into the sea.

In April 1837, Captain Stone made a round trip from Dublin to Westport to Eagle Island to Westport and thence to Dublin in the schooner *Favourite* with lighthouse stores on behalf of the Ballast Board. Like most of these tenders, the trip passed off smoothly.

The same captain aboard the same vessel did not fare quite so well later on in the year. On 30th October 1837, the tender was reported as having been lying in wait at Frenchport when she was blown from her anchors and went ashore on the east side of the harbour. Evidently, it was thought necessary to scuttle the vessel to keep her easy until the next spring tide, when she was floated off. The *Public Ledger* reported that she arrived back at Westport on 18th November, suffering only 'trifling damage.'

Date	Boat	Captain	From	To	Cargo	Reported by
22/05/1832	Francis	Davis	Dublin	Eagle Is.	Ballast-office stores	Dublin Morning Register
22/05/1833	Benjamin Nicholson	McCowan	Dublin	Eagle Is.	Ballast-office stores	Dublin Morning Register
18/05/1833	William McClane	Cassidy	Dublin	Eagle Is.	Ballast-office stores	Freemans Journal
17/08/1833	Mary Anderson	Macklejohn	Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
17/10/1833	Nancy	Wray	Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
30/10/1834	Speed	Nicholson	Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
11/04/1835	Mary Anderson		Dublin	Eagle Is.		Saunders Newsletter
20/06/1835	Waterloo		Dublin	Eagle Is.		Dublin Morning Register
02/09/1835	Leven		Dublin	Eagle Is.		Saunders Newsletter
17/04/1836	Leven	Miley	Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal

24/09/1836	Alliance		Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
19/04/1837	Favourite	Stone	Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
22/04/1837	Favourite	Stone	Westport	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
24/04/1837	Favourite	Stone	Eagle Is.	Westport		Public Ledger
10/05/1837	Hull	McMullen	Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
05/10/1837	Favourite	Stone	Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Freemans Journal
20/10/1838	Frolie	Bennett	Eagle Is.	Sligo		Sligo Champion
17/06/1839	Aid	Murray	Dublin	Eagle Is.		Freemans Journal
24/10/1839	Reform		Dublin	Eagle Is.	General cargo	Dublin Morning Register
21/05/1840	Lady Eleanor		Dublin	Eagle Is.		Dublin Morning Register
01/06/1841	Cyrus		Dublin	Eagle Is.		Dublin Monitor
07/07/1845	Victoria	Kean	Eagle Is.	Westport		Shipping Gazette
28/04/1849	Lady Fyffe	Christian	Dublin	Eagle Is.		Shipping Gazette

A list of Ballast Office tenders reported in the papers as servicing Eagle Island during the 1830s and 1840s

Hy-Brasil and others

The Ininskea Islanders called Eagle Island “Illaunsatuai” which, of course, is “Oilean sa Tuaidh” meaning the Island in the North – Thomas Ban O Raghallaigh

From ancient times, tales of a mythological island located to the west of Ireland have abounded. The most famous of these is Brasil or Hy-Brasil, which appeared on maps from the fourteenth century and only disappeared from them in the mid-1800s. Whether sightings of it were caused by fog-banks or mirages or if it was an actual island that was wiped off the face of the earth, like Atlantis, is open to debate. What is certain though, is that sightings of Hy-Brasil and other similar islands such as Manistra Ladra and the Sunken Land, have formed a considerable amount of folklore down through the ages and were widely believed to have existed along Ireland’s western seaboard. So much so, that the

myth of one became interchangeable with the others and it is very often difficult to work out which of these non-existent islands is which!

Of all these islands, the one most associated with Eagle Island and its hinterland (hintersea?) is Manistra Ladra. Samuel Lewis, writing in his *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, published in 1837, says: *Nearly opposite to Eagle Island is the headland of Annagh, projecting boldly into the bay; and about half a mile to the west of it is a shoal called Monaster Ladizi, over which the sea constantly breaks with great violence.* The wording is slightly ambiguous but it seems that the shoal is west of Eagle Island rather than west of Annagh Head.

The traveller, (I use the term in its original sense), Caesar Otway, in 1840, tells the story of 'Mr. Mickletony' O'Donnell of Termoncarra, who claimed to have seen it with his own eyes, albeit from the saddle of Achill. He placed it 'outside Inniskea' and contained a church, a tower and a monastery; a substantial, green land, with trees, houses and people. Mr. Mickletony obviously had phenomenal eyesight for he distinctly saw a woman coming out of her house to cut a cabbage.

Now, there was a man in the northern quarter of the Mullet, whose name was Watty O'Kelly. None had more acres in the peninsula, except it were the great landlords entirely; but what signified that to Watty? For he was a man for turning all into liquor, and liquor, everyone knows, has a knack of its own of flowing away, when the cock is always a turning. So Watty's acres floated away, and when he became poor, and not a keg, let alone a barrel, was to be found in his keeping with anything in it stronger than buttermilk, he thought of what an old woman once told him, that he should go in search of the 'King of the Three Kingdoms Behind' and maybe HE would tell him where he would find gold. So he goes to the cliff that hangs on the mainland, over Eagle Island, and sending courage down into himself, along with a drop, so that he saw double and talked thick, and using some spell, whose import I now do not know – he invoked the presence of Muiganogh Ree, who in a trice appeared, and the bards narrate the following dialogue as taking place, which is, I must allow, tame, prosaic and inconsequent in English, but has its verbal beauty, as well as its pointed meaning in Irish – and by the way, it must be to C.O.³ an additional proof that the sunken land once formed part of Ireland, that its king seems to speak just as good Irish as any Connaught man.

King – The fairies bless you, Watty O'Kelly.

Wat. – May God and Mary bless me – (this is repeated three times.)

King – Is it wealth you're looking for, Watty O'Kelly?

Wat. – No, but a calf of a bull that strayed from me. – (this is said also thrice).

King – The back of good luck to you, Watty O'Kelly, and seven generations after you.

Wat. – Is it any harm to ask you who you are? says Watty O'Kelly.

King – None in life: I'm King of the three Kingdoms behind. And each of these three times larger than Ireland. And that's your share of them, Watty O'Kelly.

To understand and appreciate the above poem, whose spirit depends on the similarity of sounds in the Irish language having very different meanings – taking this into consideration, the mistake will be understood that O'Kelly made in not saying 'you' instead of 'me,' which

³ Caesar Otway, presumably

is done in Irish, by the least inflection of the voice. A further belief is, that if the enchanted man gets rid of the riches of which he knows the place of concealment, his time of enchantment is ended. So the second mistake O'Kelly makes is, not assenting to the second question of Muiganogh – the point of these verses is increased by the similarity of the Irish for 'riches' and 'bull' as if O'Kelly had unintentionally misunderstood the offer, things having turned out 'contrary' so far, and the enchanted man not being allowed to make any more offers at release, he vents his execrations on Walter, tells who he is, and vanishes in a clap of thunder.

The above passage appears in Caesar Otway's *Sketches in Erris*, published in 1840, a wonderfully descriptive book of the author's ramblings around that hitherto little-known area, reporting on terrain, flora and fauna and folk tales.

Otway goes on to repeat the assertion of local agent, George Crampton, that the offshore land was a druid land with a castle high on a mountain, (not very well) guarded by giants sleeping beside their war-horses. Once every seven years, a great bell tolls, everybody wakes up and the island becomes visible. The monarch of the island – the 'King of the Three Kingdoms Behind' – may be grilled as to the whereabouts of untold amounts of gold but only three questions are allowed and any slight faux pas in the questions results in the laughing King disappearing in a clap of thunder.

Watty O'Kelly, speaking from the cliffs opposite Eagle Island, invoked the King to restore a calf that had been lost over the cliff. Unfortunately, probably being overwhelmed by the thoughts of addressing a mythical maritime monarch, he blessed himself instead of the King and the request was abruptly terminated.

Another story is told of a man named Barrett who went searching for the island in a boat upon which a coal fire blazed – yes, really – but after forty days, the fire went out and he returned home after his fruitless quest.

According to Thomas Johnson Westropp, writing in 1912/13,⁴ Manister Ladra was often confused with *The Sunken Land*, which was occasionally seen from the North Mayo coast. It was supposed to extend from near Teelin Head on the northern stretch of Donegal Bay to the Stags of Broadhaven and then halfway to America which, to my mind, would make it more of a continental landmass than an island. A boatman knew a woman called Lavelle who had seen it, complete with hills and valleys and cattle and sheep and clothes drying on hedges. A Sligo boatman operating out of Ballycastle confirmed this and said he had seen it twice at seven-year intervals and if he saw it a third time, he could disenchant it. The overwhelming responsibility of this destroyed him mentally and he died the day before the predicted third sighting.

There was also the story of seaweed collector, Biddy Took, who asked boatmen to bring her out to the island and collect her in the evening. Amused, the boatmen played along. On the journey, one of the men hooked a green-looking child and, in fright, let it go and watched it dive beneath the waves. The unfortunate angler died within the year.

And a man named Owen Gallagher, out fishing in his currach, claimed he once shot a seal and then subsequently came up upon an unknown island. There, sitting on the beach, was

⁴ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy; Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature Vol.30*

the seal but he was now an old man, nursing his injured eye. He told Gallagher to get away quickly, lest his phocine friends should arrive to avenge the assault.

A relatively recent sighting was reported in the *Western People* on 18th September 1937 – *The story of old that land, trees and buildings were at long intervals seen by residents in the Mullet, in the bosom of the Atlantic, near the island of Innisglora, was recalled on Thursday evening of last week.*

A few hours before sunset, when the ocean blue had turned to gold, some villagers in Corclough West and Gladree (the townlands on the mainland facing Eagle Island) observed in the Atlantic, on the northern side of Innisglora about a mile from the mainland, a beautiful region of green fields divided by emerald hedgerows and dotted with clumps of pyramid shaped trees. Within the tiny parks were buildings and castle turrets. The phenomenon lasted only a few moments and again there was nothing to be observed, only the gentle ripple of the Atlantic.

Among those who were favoured with the legendary vision on this occasion were Mrs. Gilbert and Ml. Deane of Corclough West; Patk. McIntyre of Gladree; Anthony Gallagher, Corclough West; and Dennis Munnelly of Cross.

The fact that there are no trees or buildings on the adjacent mainland to cast their reflection makes the story more mysterious and residents of the Mullet state that from time immemorial at intervals of seven years, the vision was beheld but not by the second person in any family.

Many old people residing on the mainland, adjacent to Innisglora, have recollections of hearing a story in circulation among their parents that an avenue enclosed by floral shrubs in wild blossom had been observed in the early morning, leading from the mainland at Cross to the island of Innisglora, while the Atlantic rolled in mirthful glee on both sides.

Only a few years ago, a Frenchman, skipper of a poaching trawler, put into Scotchport, near Termoncarra to extricate from his gear a large branch of a tree, fresh in foliage, which he said he said he had dragged up from the bottom of the sea near Innisglora.



Wave-eye view of the West station and the slopes to attack it (photo by Dave Horkan)

The 1840s

Stormy Seas

Captain Boyd, aboard the *Lyra*, reported upon his arrival at Galway on the 8th June 1840, that five days previously they had passed a quantity of timber off Eagle Island, said the *Morning Advertiser*

It was reported from Cork that the *John Cooper*, under the command of Captain Salmon, had put into that harbour, six days after leaving Greenock, bound for Australia with a cargo of rum and brandy. It had lost its topmast on Wednesday 16th September 1840 while off Eagle Island – *Southern Reporter* 22nd September 1840

The schooner *Mary Ann* arrived in Stranraer on her voyage from Westport to London with the news that the Master, Captain Richard Lancaster, had been washed overboard at eight o'clock on the morning of 1st March near Eagle Island. Mr. Aitkin, the mate, attested that the accident took place while the ship was laying to in a heavy gale of wind. Every piece of wood was immediately thrown overboard in the hope that the captain might cling on until the vessel could get close. Although the captain was still seen swimming fifteen minutes after the catastrophe, the crew were unable to turn the vessel in the severe gale and he was seen no more. To compound matters, Mrs. Lancaster was on board at the time and her feelings are better imagined than described. Richard Lancaster was a generous, warm-hearted man, and a brave and accomplished seaman. He was the last of five brothers. – *The Cumberland Paquet*, Thursday 15th March 1842

Captain William Stevenson was washed overboard in a heavy sea off Eagle Island on 9th September, reported the crew of the Greenock sloop *Jabez*, when it put into Broadhaven on a voyage from Orkney to Tralee – *The Witness* (Edinburgh) 28th September 1842

The *James Richmond* of Whitby, which was abandoned on 19th December, sank in deep water to the north of Eagle Island – *Lloyds List*, Monday 26th December 1842

After contending with heavy south-westerly gales for ten days, Captain Bilton of the *Lady Elinor* decided, with the loss of the jibboom, to turn back for his home port of Liverpool, rather than continue to Westport – *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, Monday 1st January 1844 (Lest we decry Captain Bilton too vehemently, his was but one of seventeen English, Scottish and Welsh ships bound for West of Ireland ports that turned back for home on that day.)

The stern of the *Kate Nickelby* of Glasgow came ashore at Drum (between Eagle Island and North Inniskea Island) in late December 1845. She went to pieces completely and it is believed she may have sailed from the West Indies, judging by the number of empty rum puncheons and sugar hogsheads strewn along the shoreline. Of the crew, there was no sign and it was feared that they had all perished – *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, Thursday 1st January 1846

A report from Clifden stated that the schooner *Rev. Theobald Mathew* put into Roundstone on Sunday 18th January. Bound from Liverpool to Galway, she was almost lost in a heavy gale off Eagle Island, the sea rolling over her and carrying away her boom, foresail and topsail. With much difficulty the crew succeeded in heaving part of the cargo

overboard, which put her to rights. They were now unloading the remainder of the cargo at Roundstone – *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* Saturday 24th January 1846

The *Gwain Maid*, skippered by Captain Llewellyn, put in at the Isle of Islay on January 5th 1849 en route from Limerick to Liverpool. She had experienced hard weather near Eagle Island and had a lost a man overboard – Owen Davies of Cardigan – on December 20th – *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* Thursday 11th January 1849

The Keepers

Keeper	Year(s)
John Doyle	
Naphtali Hackney	
James McCabe	1846
Brian McCabe?	1849

On the 6th June 1841 – census night – there were fifteen people living on the island, one for every acre. There were seven dwelling houses on the island too but, as the actual census returns were blown to pieces and rained down over much of Dublin in the Four Courts conflagration of 1922, we have no idea how many people lived in each house. They could well have been four keepers and their families in which case they would have lived in four of the houses. Or the number may have included visiting engineers or painters who would have used the houses erected for the construction workers a decade previously.

For **John Doyle**, sadly, we have no exact dates. On July 16th 1859, the joint commission of the three lighthouse boards – English, Scottish and Irish – aboard the steamer *Vivid*, visited the Copeland Islands as part of their fact-finding ‘cruise’ around Ireland and Britain. There they met the two keepers, one of whom was John Doyle. Doyle was 57 years of age and had been 24 years in the service. Prior to joining the Ballast Board, he had been a stone-mason. He had spent ten years on Eagle Island, he said, and some time at Howth and Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire.) The report noted that he was not in good health and he had ‘some children.’

We know he served at Howth pier light in 1850 and 1855, so his decade on Eagle must have begun in 1840 at the very latest. He had left the service by June 1862. Maybe his health problems were serious.

Naturally, the ten years at Eagle means he was one of our boys but the fact that he was a stone-mason prior to that is interesting. If, during the construction phase of a lighthouse, one of the tradesmen showed themselves to be honest and reliable, they were often left in charge of the site once the main body of work had been completed. Often too, they were kept on once the light was established. It could be that Doyle, 24 years in the service, meaning he began around 1835 – when Eagle Island was nearly completed – could well have been one of the first keepers.

Incidentally, two months after the visit of the *Vivid*, a John Doyle arrived on Slyne Head as a temporary replacement for the Principal Keeper Edward Gregory, who was sick. The new keeper however only lasted a couple of days before he drowned. There was a court

case later accusing the PK's wife, Anne Gregory of poisoning Doyle, though she was later released. However, this is unlikely to have been our John Doyle as the unfortunate man arrived as an assistant keeper and Copeland John was a principal keeper. It could well have been a son of his though.

The exotically named **Naphtali Hackney** – Naphtali was one of the sons of Jacob in the Bible – served his time on Eagle Island, although it is difficult to gauge when and for how long.

We know from the Calwell lists of 1862, when he was listed as principal keeper on Rathlin Island, that, at the time, he was 47 years old and had 20 years' service under his belt. Not only that but he was married with six children, despite which, his health was said to have been 'good.'

This information would make him born around 1815 (in Belfast, according to later records) and he had joined the lighthouse service in 1842. His 'list of previous stations', which Calwell normally lists in chronological order, is *Tuskar Rock, Eagle Island, Clare Island, Tory Island, South Rock and Fastnet*. Given he started at Tuskar in 1842 and he married Jane Chambers, when stationed on Tory Island in 1847, it seems his first three postings – including Eagle - were of relatively short duration.

The *Cruise of the Vivid* report in 1859, describes him as an Under-keeper on Rathlin Island. Although he is not mentioned, his list of previous stations identifies him and says he was the son of a lightkeeper and had been appointed by the Inspector.

He was replaced as PK on Rathlin in 1864 and doesn't appear to have made an appearance at any other station subsequent to that. When he had married Jane in 1847, she became his third wife. She died in her native Milford in 1871, when Naphtali was described as an overseer of a brickyard. He then married his fourth wife, Grace, in 1872, when he was a clerk. He was still a clerk in Belfast when Grace died in 1878 and held the same position when he married his fifth wife, Margaret, in 1880.

In 1885, at 70 years of age, he and Margaret emigrated to Adelaide in Australia. He spent seven years there, three years in Victoria (the state!) and sixteen years in New South Wales before finally giving up in 1911, aged 95 years.

(There is a family anecdote that he once had an affair with one of Queen Victoria's daughters, though where he found the time or energy is difficult to imagine. The family tale is that he was a charmer in his younger years and once had an affair with Princess Alice, who may well have come from Greece and had a thirst for knowledge, being very interested in the common people.)

In May 1846, **James McCabe** started his lightkeeping career with a spell on Eagle Island. He was thirty-two years old and probably the father of Sampson McCabe who, himself became a keeper in the late 1860s. Little is known about him, save the bare bones of the stations he served at. After Eagle Island, he went to Kinsale until late 1860, when he was transferred to Rathlin O'Beirne. If he was fourteen years at Eagle and Kinsale, it is probable he served many years at both.

After Rathlin O'Beirne, where he was PK, he went to St. John's Point, county Down and then South Rock. After 1871, he doesn't surface again until his death in Derry in 1891 aged 78. His wife Cecilia survived him by eight years.

It probably isn't a coincidence that **Bryan McCabe** with an address of *Eagle Island, near Belmullet, co. Mayo* – so it can't possibly be Achill Island! – is listed in the Ireland Diocesan and Prerogative Wills index for 1849. A tradesman or engineer would not have given the island as their address. The only person to do so would be a lightkeeper.

One might speculate that he was James McCabe's father. He was resident on the island, so would have been a keeper or a member of a keeper's family.

	John Daintfield Mills, Co. Down	1857
M. McCabe	Bernard Drummenan, Co. Monaghan	1817
"	Bernard, Rutland Square, Dublin	1828
"	Bryan Eagle Island near Belmullet,	1849
	Co. Mayo.	
"	Christ. Corduff, Co. Dublin	1844

Unfortunately, according to the National Archives, the actual will itself cannot be found in a search, so we know nothing more about the life (and death) of Bryan.

The 1840s

A detailed Ballast Board report of 1844 showed the financial state of play of the company. Eagle was one of those still in the red. Ships with a combined tonnage of 227,856 tons passed the two lighthouses, yielding receipts worth £245 18s 8d.

However, thanks to a whopping £936 8s 0d spent on works and repairs on the island, the total outlay came to £1085 14s 8d, a nett loss of £839 16s.

The inhabitants of the fourteen acres would doubtless have been somewhat perplexed to see a pleasure steamer cruising around the island in 1842. The *St. Columba*, with William McAllister as Commander (not merely a Captain, mark you) was advertised to leave Sligo at 7.30am precisely for Killalla (sic), passing the mouth of the River Moy, where passengers could alight or board as they wished. From there, she would proceed past Kilcummin and Downpatrick Heads and the Stags of Broadhaven to either Broadhaven or Eagle Island, weather permitting.

Given the propensity for Eagle Island's sudden gales and shipwrecks, it would be surprising if anybody availed off this offer, particularly as they had to stump up 4s for a cabin, or 2s 6d for steerage! On the other hand, the road from Ballina to Belmullet had not yet reached its current state of perfection, and the wilds of Mayo might have appealed as a tourist destination.

Trinity House's Select Committee on Lighthouses produced an 1845 report, giving a report of Britain and Ireland's lighthouses, beacons and lightships. Eagle Island's two fixed

lights were both reported to be powered by nineteen oil burners but the characteristics of the lights had remained unchanged.



Passing the helipad, the 'little' walled garden at the bottom of the island certainly looks a lot larger than it does from the aerial photos. The Cross Rock, behind the wall on the right-hand side shows why ships should not attempt to access Erris Head (out of picture, top left) on the inside (photo Fergus Sweeney 2022)

Piracy, or something like it

'... the persevering plundering propenalties of the wild Irish'

The concept of piracy on the high seas has been very much conditioned by great works of art, such as *Treasure Island*, *Captain Pugwash* and the *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The pirates were always cut-throat villains, swinging from ropes on large sailing ships and slashing with cutlasses at every honest sailor who tried to stand in their way. They wore big hats and striped trousers and flew the Jolly Roger and struck fear into the heart of every merchant ship that sighted them.

The only exception to this appears to be when the piracy was carried out by agents of an empire. Sir Francis Drake, one of the most notorious and brutal pirates ever to tread the decks of a boat, is regarded, in Britain, as a heroic figure who strove to make Britain great, no matter how many hundreds or thousands were murdered in the meantime.

Back in the mid-1800s though, the reality of piracy was that it was far more commonplace and localised and was practised by many coastal communities around the coasts of Ireland and England.

In *Wreckers*, Bella Bathurst demonstrates time and time again the very fine margins between plunder and recovery. For a destitute coastal community, to have a wreck washed up on their shoreline, was seen as a divine right by many. God was merely providing driftwood to help build houses and fences. And, if the community engineered the wreck by shining false lights, well, they were only getting a tiny, tiny fraction of the limitless wealth being made by rich merchants of the day.

Wreckers would entice ships onto the shore and then plunder them for clothes, cargo and wood. It was God who provided and God would not have provided if his chosen subjects were destined to swing from a yardarm for availing of his generosity. So, it was best all round if there were no survivors to tell the authorities what had happened. Such was typical of the logic used by the wreckers to justify murder.

The difference of course between piracy and wreckers was that one took place at sea and the other on the coast. And local pirates sailing curraghs and small skiffs rarely killed those on board if their demands were acceded to.

The islanders off Inishtrahull off the coast of Donegal used to row up to large sailing ships with fish they had caught and barter with the captains, who were often quite happy to trade. They were particularly interested in any whiskey that might be offered and if, when the party boarded, a couple of the lads skipped off around the cabins, looking for an odd bottle or two, was that classed as a treasonable offence?

It is another common misconception that the Irish Famine began in 1845 and lasted for five years. This was the Great Famine, An Gorta Mór, which killed one million people, mainly on the south and west coasts of Ireland and forced one million more to emigrate.

But there were other famines too. The famine of 1740-41 wiped out up to 20% of the Irish population. People died of starvation at regular intervals in the three decades leading up to the Great Famine. Hunger was prevalent almost to 1900 but in the latter stages the people were better organised to combat tyrannical landlordism and the effects were not so widely felt.

All of which begs the question – if you steal Trevelyan's corn so the young might see the morn, who is the bigger criminal – you or Trevelyan?

In *Within the Mullet*, Rita Nolan demonstrates that piracy was a long-standing tradition off the Erris coastline. In 1775, a sloop loaded with 40 tons of herring was boarded by local people in Blacksod Bay and stripped, not only of her cargo, but of everything stealable on board. Bizarrely, in 1822, the *Betsey* of Liverpool put into Broadhaven Bay and was relieved of her cargo of 1,000 tons of meal, not by the starving poor but by rich ship-owners!

She also details the case of the *Mansfield* in 1934, which was abandoned by its crew north of the Inniskeas because they thought it was sinking. Naturally, the islanders boarded the deserted ship and started looting. And indeed, chased away the coastguards when they tried to intervene. There was a coastguard station at Termoncarra, which did act as a deterrent but, naturally, desperate times called for desperate measures and the instances of piracy increased with the coming of the Great Famine in 1847.

The brig *Olive Branch*, travelling from Glasgow to Westport with a cargo of Indian corn and Indian corn meal, was boarded by a party of *Irishmen* who, after threatening the lives

of the captain and crew, relieved the boat of around six tons of her cargo while off Eagle Island. This titbit from the *Northern Daily Mail* appeared on 17th July 1847 under the headline, *Further piracies on the Irish coast*, indicating that this incident was part of a trend along the coastline.

Also included in the article was a report of a schooner of coals from Glasgow to Limerick being plundered for part of her cargo, though the location is not given.

The Pilot reported that, on the same day as the *Olive Branch* attack⁵, the schooner *Sarah* suffered an identical incident, with five tons of meal stolen. And on the following day, the schooner *Ranger* was attacked near Blacksod and 170 barrels of meal taken. In this incident, the raiding party left one of their men behind, who was subsequently handed over to the authorities.

Things took a turn for the worse two days later, reported the *Mayo Constitution*. On this occasion, the *Emily Maria*, a smack from Skerries carrying Indian corn, was attacked near Inniskea. However, the captain had had the foresight to request reinforcements from the captain of the *Emerald*, stationed at Broadhaven, which had a detachment of marines on board. Despite being warned of this, the pirates were so desperate that they attacked anyway, with the result that four of their number were killed and more injured. *It is hoped*, concluded the reporter, *that this melancholy occurrence will put a stop to plunder on the Erris coast*.

The *London Express* reported that same month that a sloop from Garlieston (sic) was off Eagle Island when it was surrounded and taken possession of by 116 marauders, the extraordinary accuracy of which raises suspicions in itself. They were on the point of emptying it when a man came on board and ordered them all off. To a man, they did so. It turned out that the man was not the pirate leader but a local tenant-farmer who had shown great kindness to the 'local peasantry' during the 'recent distress.'

The following month, a Lloyd's agent reported to the *Globe* that the *Royal Victoria*, en route from Belfast to Westport with Indian corn meal, was boarded by the occupants of seven small boats just off Eagle Island. They were in the process of breaking open the hatches when they were confronted by two marines and an officer, who had been placed on board from the *Dasher* steamer for protection. The upshot was that one of the attackers was shot dead, another wounded and three more taken prisoner.

One starts to wonder at this stage how there was a famine at all with all the Indian meal sailing into Westport.

Douglas Jerrold's *Weekly Newspaper* of Saturday 4th September 1847 follows up the *Royal Victoria* story. Captain William Bryce of the brig *Exmouth* had seen the government steamer put aboard the two marines and the officer on the *Royal Victoria* to protect her from the persevering plundering propenalties (propensities?) of the wild Irish.

Later that day the *Exmouth* was surrounded by seven boats that obviously came from Eagle Island. (This was probably Achill Island, as it is unlikely that the lightkeepers were launching raids on passing ships) The captain shouted down to them that he would shoot the first man to try and ascend the side of the ship, a threat that seemed to have little effect until it was translated into Irish by a boy onboard. The would-be pirates hurriedly

⁵ Saturday 4th July

sailed away, leaving Captain Bryce to write smugly to his masters that he had neither musket nor shot on the ship.

Although this bout of piracy happened off the coast of many parts of Ireland, it appears that Erris was particularly affected by such maritime lawlessness. A notice in the *Dublin Packet* in August 1847 said that government steamboats were patrolling the areas worse affected by *the lawless fishermen pirates*. The steamers were listed – the *Fearless*, cruising between Limerick City and the River Fergus; the *Lucifer*, patrolling the waters from Sligo to Killybegs; and the *Myrmidon*, guarding the areas of Carrick, Clonmel, Ross and Waterford. The other three ships listed were all off the Mullet – the aforementioned *Dasher*, under Lieutenant Commander French, patrolling Blacksod Bay; the *Bloodhound*, under Lieutenant Captain Philips doing the same job in Broadhaven Bay and the stretch from Eagle Island to Killala Bay; and the *Emerald*, keeping an eye on the islands off Blacksod Bay under Second Master Commander Beach. The steamers were named after Santa's reindeer at the time.

In October 1847, the *Mayo Telegraph* declared it was their painful duty to inform us that piratical attacks off the Erris coast had not abated. The *Kate Thora*, on her way to Newport from Liverpool with American flour, Indian corn and Indian meal became becalmed off Eagle Island and was immediately surrounded by ten boats, each boat containing between six and ten persons. Fortunately for the larger boat, a breeze suddenly sprang up as the marauders were preparing to board, which took the *Kate Thora* swiftly out of the grasp of her *rapacious pursuers*.⁶

The show of force seems to have had the desired effect for the seas around Eagle Island – which seemed to have been something of an epicentre for the pirate trade – turned remarkably quiet thereafter, despite the widespread destruction of An Gorta Mór.

There were, of course, isolated incidents. In June 1850, for example, after the security guards were called off due to the success of the mission, a small incidence of piracy took place, again off Eagle Island. The schooner *Jane* had sailed from Liverpool, bound for Westport and at 10pm on the 17th June, it was within three miles of Eagle Island when it was approached by seven boats, with about four men in each. They boarded the vessel and removed twenty barrels of flour and then rowed away.

Not much of an act of piracy, really, warranting a mere paragraph in the local paper. But luckily for us (if not for them) six men were arrested for the incident and appeared at the Mayo Assizes in a trial reported in detail by the Mayo Constitution.

Michael Walsh, James Hart, Peter Cannon, Anthony Lavelle, Patrick Rice and John Joyce were arraigned for piratically and feloniously stealing, taking and carrying away 260 stone weight of flour (value £15); and 19 barrels worth 5s, the property of John Reilly; three barrels of Plaster of Paris worth 26 shillings; and one barrel of Epsom Salts worth 12 shillings.

The captain of the vessel, James Johnston, said the vessel was bore up within three miles of Eagle Island at the time of the attack. The weather was fine and the wind moderate. The seven boats came alongside and, after making fast, asked the captain if he would like to buy some fish. The captain enquired about the type of fish and about two-thirds of the visitors came on board.

⁶ *Dundee Advertiser* 22nd October 1847

They asked him for where he was bound and he told them Westport. They enquired of his cargo and he told them salt and iron. At this the man who appeared to be the ringleader said he wanted to see for himself. They cut the longboat away from the entrance to the hold and then stove in the hatch with a hatchet. One man jumped down and a few moments later shouted up, *Flour!*

The captain then told the men he would hold them accountable if anything happened to the boat, at which one of the men, brandishing a hatchet, caused him to retreat to the far end of the boat. With a mixture of ropes and manual labour, they hauled the flour, Plaster of Paris and Epsom salts up onto the deck and loaded them into the seven boats.

The crew of the *Jane* consisted of four men and an apprentice, Captain Johnston said. They put up reasonable resistance, but the odds were too overwhelming. He had been afraid and so had the crew, although the perpetrators had offered them no violence. The boats then rowed off towards the mainland.

The captain identified Hart, Cannon and Rice as being three of the men who boarded the *Jane*. He said that Hart appeared to be the ringleader, exerting influence over the others. Another member of the crew identified Cannon and Rice; a third member positively identified Hart, Lavelle and Rice; the mate identified Hart, Joyce, Rice and Walsh.

Some of the prisoners lived in the village of Tip in the north of the Mullet and it was there, in Hart's house, that the coastguard found one of the barrels of flour the following day.

Alibis were produced for Walsh and a blind man, Edward Bell, swore that he had slept with Cannon on the night of the piracy. The two of them had been working in the fields all day and they often shared a bed at night. Cannon's wife corroborated this.

In summing up, the judge directed the six-man jury that the case came down to whether they believed each of the six accused was in the party that boarded the *Jane* on the night in question. There were, he said, some discrepancies in the testimony of the witnesses of the prosecution about who was there and who wasn't.

The jury retired but failed to reach a verdict that day. After being locked away for the night, they resumed their deliberations and eventually found all the prisoners guilty. They judge sentenced them to two years hard labour each.

There were obviously similar incidents in 1862 – one involving the plundering of a quantity of Indian corn bound for the starving people of Boffin, Letterfrack and Cleggan – according to a letter written by *A Correspondent* to the editor of the *Liverpool Mercury* on 12th July 1862. It began –

Another line has been added to the history of Irish peasant distress. Inniskea has added a second to its first act of piracy. The fact is appalling. Between the first and second piracy, a month had elapsed. The inference is that no inquiry has been made into the condition of the Inniskeas, or that no means have been taken to remove the cause that drives the people to piracy. One could very much apply that paragraph to much of the history of British rule in Ireland.

Technically, the crime of piracy only relates to acts of plunder committed on *the high seas*. Such acts committed in offshore, coastal waters would not come under the legal definition of piracy, a fact ignored by many Victorian journalists.

In April 1863, the *Laurel*, bound for Westport from Liverpool, was boarded off Eagle Island by sixty-four people who had arrived in thirteen boats. They immediately took

charge of the vessel, saying their families were starving. Captain Mullen offered them money but they refused to take it, adding that they only wanted provisions. They broke open the hatches and, on discovering there was a cargo of maize, started eating the raw corn. Their hunger assuaged, they carried off fifteen tons of corn and rowed away.

But this was an isolated incident. As more and more ships became steam-driven, the days of the becalmed sailing vessel died away and the opportunities for plunder decreased. For the most part, the finger of suspicion was often pointed, rightly or wrongly, at the Inniskea islanders. The Inniskea Islands, north and south, lie directly south of Eagle Island and were inhabited by a fiercely independent and somewhat lawless group of people until a terrible storm in 1927 robbed the community of ten of its fishermen, a blow from which they never recovered. The remaining islanders were relocated to the Mullet peninsula, mostly towards the south, to Glosh and Surgeview, opposite their island home.

As late as 1891, a widely-syndicated article was published, badmouthing the islanders, claiming that they used to *organize attacks on sailing vessels becalmed off the islands. On these occasions, the boats would surround the ships and the islanders get on board in large numbers on pretence of barter, when they would carry off everything they wished for. This continued to well on in this century and there are some very old men alive now who were at one time transported for these acts of piracy.*

The Storm Wall

If the distance between the East and West towers is 396 feet, then it is probable that Eagle Island's storm wall stretches to at least 450 feet, as it curls protective arms around the two towers at each extremity. It is also 20 feet high and is, at a very conservative estimate, a minimum of three feet thick. As such it is the longest and greatest storm wall in the Irish Lights family.



The storm wall from the East tower to the West (photo by Fergus Sweeney)

As far as I am aware, that other great wall (in China) may be slightly longer but its absence of lighthouses is quite disappointing. And Eagle Island's storm wall rarely gets clogged with tourists trying to walk along its parapet.

The West tower was only two storeys high when one of Eagle's crazy storms washed it and most of the building materials clean off the island. This would seem to indicate that the storm wall hadn't been built at the time as it would have offered much greater protection to the emerging tower. This may have been the first indication to Halpin that green seas could rise up the 200-foot cliff and cause serious damage to anything along the island's western edge. If he had known of this, one imagines he would have built the protective wall first, or at least, the ends of it.

Curiously, the thickness of the wall is constant along its length, with the exception of the small section behind the accommodation block at the West station, which is much thinner. This is odd because that is exactly where you would have expected the wall to be at its maximum. However, this section of the wall is not the original and is a twentieth century addition. Seven massive breeze block buttresses fortify the equally non-original wall, creating individual handball alleys for up to six people. Next to the fog station, two smaller, rectangular supports bolster what appears to be part of the original wall.



Joe McCabe aerial photo showing reduction in thickness of the storm wall near the West station accommodation block

Of course, it was possible to get in behind the wall, or walk on top of it, though neither would have been recommended when the wind was up. Whitewashing of the wall took place in spring prior to the arrival of the annual inspection committee.



The flying buttresses behind the accommodation block on Eagle are said to rival those on Notre Dame cathedral for their architectural beauty (photo by Dave Horkan August 2015)

At the East tower, there is a section of double wall, that seems to indicate that there was a need, even with three-foot thick walls, to construct further protection for the tower and dwellings at the lower level. It was this light that bore the brunt of the damage in 1861 and again in 1894. Located further down the slope, its tower needed to attain the same focal plane as its higher companion, so naturally more of it stuck up above the wall. When the seas crashed in from the north-west, the wall (and the tower) were therefore at a greater risk of damage as the green seas swept up the cliff.



View of the eastern end of the wall from Fergus Sweeney in 2022. The capped tower crouches behind the double wall which creates a teardrop shape. It is unknown if this was an original feature or if it was added later. It is possible to enter the teardrop through the drainage arch but the reason for wanting to do so remains unclear.

It is testament to the nineteenth century builders that, through all the storms of the past 190 years, the storm wall has never been completely breached. Damaged, maybe,

but never compromised or in danger of succumbing. A large crack appeared near the East tower during the December 1894 storm. In the fearful storm of November 1986, when Gerry Sweeney was sure it was gone, the wall held firm, protecting the accommodation block, and the keepers within, from certain destruction.

Such service naturally came at a cost and the price was paid by the keepers who had to paint the wall, front and back, every springtime in preparation for the commissioners' annual inspection. How many thousands of hours of leisure time were lost down through the years due to this onerous chore will never be known!



Dramatic Al Hamilton photo from the 1970s showing stormy seas approaching the West tower. The small outhouse at the western end of the storm wall can be seen behind the tower. This was the normal place for accessing the outside of the storm wall for painting or hiding from the PK.

The 1850s

Stormy Seas

The *Coromandel*, of and bound to Liverpool from Quebec with a cargo of timber, was picked up off Eagle Island, derelict and waterlogged, and brought into Broadhaven Bay. Two days later she had drifted back out to sea – *London Evening Standard* Monday 16th December 1850.

On a journey from Glasgow to New York, laden with coal and pig iron, the barque *Clarence* was overtaken by a gale, which broke her bulwarks and did considerable damage. On inspection, off Eagle Island, four feet of water was found in the hold and Captain Willis and the mate, Mr. Reid, immediately decided to make for Galway, where the ship was unloaded and refitted – *Galway Vindicator* 29th September 1852

On his arrival at Tarbert on October 10th, Captain M'Keegan reported that the *Lucy Ann* had left Killybegs on the morning of 5th October. At midnight, she encountered heavy seas off Eagle Island, which washed the boy overboard. Providentially, the next wave washed him back onboard again. The longboat was stove in and part of the bulwarks were carried away – *Cork Constitution* Thursday 15th October 1857 (One hopes the boy did the lottery on his arrival in Kerry)

The brigantine *Ann Todd* – or what was left of her – on a trip from Ibrail (Romania) to England was abandoned in a sinking state off Eagle Island. Not only had the ship sprung a leak, but a strong gale had carried away her bulwarks, bowsprit, jibboom, mainsails, foresails, foretopgallant mast and mainstay sails. The crew – exhausted battling the pump and short of provisions – were picked up and landed at Inver Bay, near Killybegs – *Cork Constitution* Thursday 9th December 1858

The Keepers

Keeper	Year(s)
Peter Byrne	early 1850s
William Higginbotham	1850s
Patrick Golding	early 1850s
Philip Kennedy	1854-63
Michael Duffy	1855-64

Peter Byrne was born around 1828 and joined the Ballast Board in 1846 at Clare Island lighthouse. His second posting was to Eagle Island and from there he went to Slyne Head. He was posted to South Rock in early 1860 by which time he was married with three children. If his first three stations were roughly equal in length, he would have served at Eagle in the early fifties.

In 1864, he was transferred to Carlingford on promotion to principal keeper and then went to Poolbeg in 1867. By this time, he had five children. He then disappears from view, possibly because Poolbeg was the only lighthouse that didn't make the cut from the Ballast Board to Irish Lights.

The history of a lighthouse would not be complete without at least one Higginbotham numbered among its keepers and, less than twenty years since its establishment, Eagle Island was doubtless delighted to welcome **William Higginbotham** onto its lush pastureland.



William, who was born in Dublin in the early 1820s, was the son of another William, who was also a keeper. But it was the William junior, who swaggered up to the Mullet in the late 1840s or early 1850s, who really lit the torch fuse under the Higginbotham dynasty, fathering twelve children, five of whom became lightkeepers and one more a lightshipman. He had started out on the Tuskar in 1845 and Eagle Island was his second station. He was back on the Tuskar by 1853 when he married Wexford girl Mary Carr and then had spells at Mine Head, Spit Bank, Carlingford and Balbriggan before his final ten years at Ballynacourty (Dungarvan). He died in 1908 aged 84 (give or take.)

William and Mary in later years

Patrick Golding was born around 1825 and his first posting as a keeper was in 1846 at the Tuskar Rock. He then went to Eagle Island, possibly around 1850, then on to Rathlin O'Beirne, Dunmore East and then to Balbriggan from 1860 to 1866. Aside from the fact that he was married with two children in 1862 and didn't know how to spell his surname, the rest of his existence is shrouded in mystery.

Philip Kennedy arrived at Eagle Island West as principal keeper in 1854 with sixteen years of experience behind him, having previously worked at Loop Head and the Old Head of Kinsale. One wonders if he might have been dubbed PKPK by some Victorian wag. At the time, he was 38 years old and his father, George had been a lightkeeper before him. Philip had been born in the city of Dublin.

Philip spent over nine years as principal keeper, being transferred to Hook Head in 1863 and later serving at the Tuskar and Carlingford Lough. As a superannuated widowed keeper in 1880, he married Ann Howard, who was the widow of the Calf Rock keeper, Richard Howard, who had drowned at that station in 1869.

In his retirement, Philip was the keeper at the Ballygeary lighthouse in Rosslare Harbour. In 1882, a Wexford Harbour Board's discussion on complaints about the light led to one

member suggesting that they should go out and examine the light, *at two o'clock in the morning when the lightkeeper is, perhaps, asleep.*⁷

This drew the ire of the bould Philip who retorted, amongst other comments in an acid-dipped letter, that *it is not likely that the lightkeeper at Rosslare lighthouse would either let his lamps run short of oil or be found sleeping on his duty – a man who served thirty-eight years as lightkeeper under the Honourable Corporation of Irish Lights and was superannuated out of the same without one single word of complaint for that long number of years.*

Despite his birth date while in Irish Lights being around 1815, he nevertheless declared himself to be 98 years old on the 1901 Census and his death cert the following year showed him to be a centenarian.

There were two Duffys who were principal keepers on Eagle Island East station during the 1860s. In fact, Frederick Duffy took over from **Michael Duffy**, who was probably his elder brother.

Michael was born around 1827 and joined the Ballast Board in 1851, starting at Loop Head. He joined Eagle Island in 1855, though four years seems a very short time to become a principal keeper and it seems more probable that he was promoted at some time during his tenure. By 1862, he was definitely the PK and was married with five children. At least two of these, (Michael, July 1860 and Richard James, August 1862) were born on the island. He left Eagle for Ferris Point in Larne in 1864 and then went to the Copelands. After that, he wound down with Mutton Island, Broadhaven and Inishgort, where his wife Catherine (nee Kelly) acted as Female Assistant. He had at least nine children, the last in 1880. He died at Inishgort in 1887.

The 1850s

Both lanterns were badly damaged by a violent gale on 5th and 6th February 1850. A *Notice to Mariners* from W.H. Parker, agent to Lloyds, dated the 8th of the month stated that neither light had been lit since the night of the 5th. Apparently, the boatmen had signalled to the lighthouse but there had been no reply. It was noticeable that there were two cracks in the storm wall but no communication had been received from the island since the gale began. Mr. Parker added that the gale was still blowing strong.

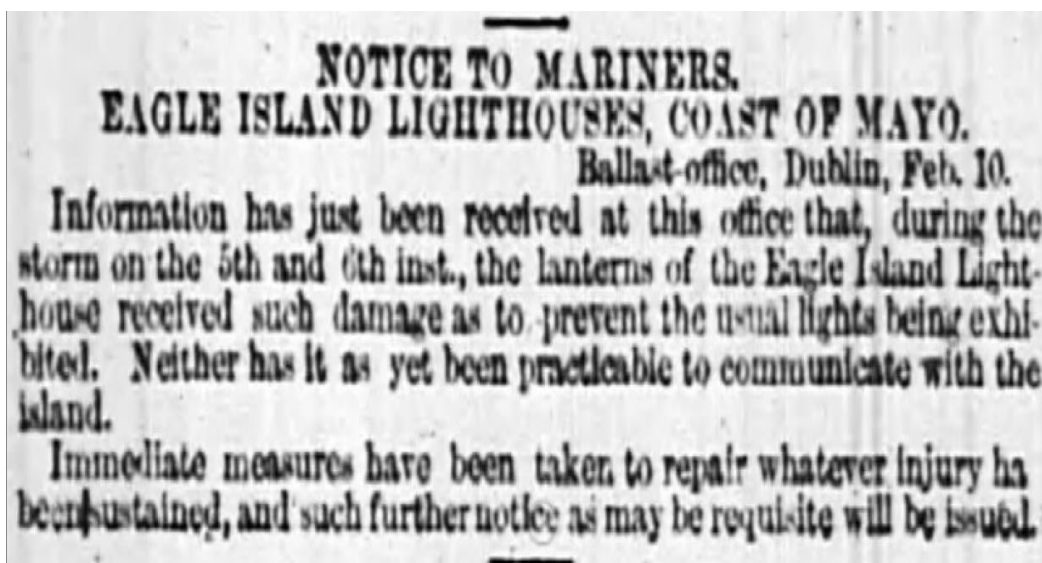
As more than one commentator has remarked, it must certainly have been some gale to knock out both lanterns and also breach the storm wall in more than one place.

In reply, the Ballast Board issued their own *Notice* on Sunday 10th February, basically a holding notice that said that the lights were out, they had been unable to communicate with the island and a further notice would be issued when required.

Four days later, a final *NTM* was issued, declaring that the lights had been back in action since Monday 11th, although the workmen sent down by the Board had still been unable to land. Somehow the keepers had managed to restore the light after six days. The workmen managed to land on the 14th and completed the work. The delay was not only

⁷ *Wexford People* April 19th 1882

due to the weather but also to the landing stage which had suffered considerable damage in the initial storm.



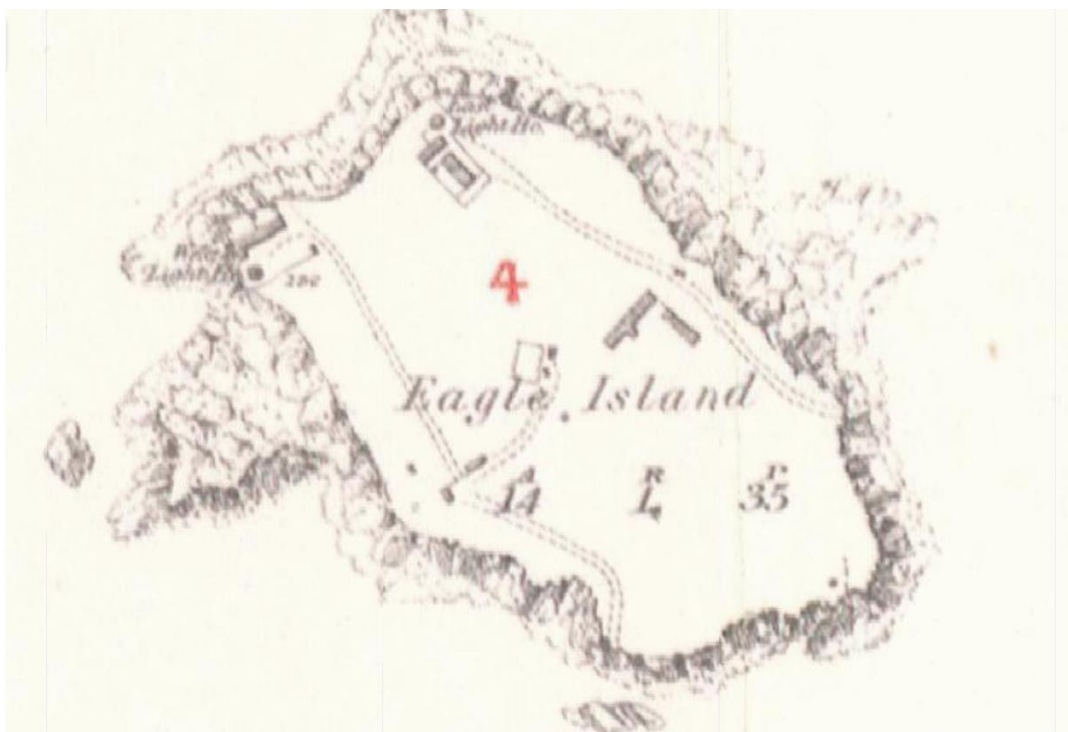
The 1851 census on the 31st March indicated that there were ten people present on the island in the six dwelling houses. This was down on both counts from the 1841 census. The workmen would have long departed and, with the exception of a transient workman, the ten people were probably all keepers and families.

It should be mentioned here that, although keepers were expected to be heroic figures, braving violent seas, doing their own repairs and painting etc, it was expected, at this time, that there should be a woman of the house to do the cooking and the cleaning. This was generally the wife, who concentrated on these chores while rearing and educating the family and probably tending whatever goats or sheep were kept on the island too. In the case of an unmarried keeper, it was not expected that the poor mite would clean and cook for himself, so he would be encouraged to bring along his mother or sister to do this for him. When, of course, the families were withdrawn to the mainland from rock stations all around the country in the 1890s and 1900s, the keepers got a rude awakening and suddenly had to get crash courses in home economics!

In 1855, the officials conducting the first detailed survey of land ownership in Ireland arrived on Eagle Island. The Primary Valuation was the first major valuation of property in Ireland and was carried out to determine the level of taxation due to the Crown to landowners throughout Ireland. Supervised by civil servant, Richard Griffiths, it became known as Griffith's Valuation and, in the absence of the vast majority of the nineteenth century censuses, has become an important tool of genealogical research.

One wonders really why some poor terrified and sea-sick civil servant was obliged to be rowed out to the island – probably by Martin Donohue and six hefty locals – to determine the area of the island. Eagle Island, incidentally, weighed in at 14 acres, one rood and 35 perches, which translated into a rateable annual valuation of 15 shillings for the land and £31 5s for the buildings. One source later estimated the composition of the fourteen acres as being 6:1 grass to rock.

(Acres we still use today. There were four roods in an acre and forty perches in a rood, which all sounds very Lord of the Rings, even to older people like me.)



The map which accompanied Griffith's Valuation was lifted directly from the Ordnance Survey First Edition map. On the mainland, it is full of red lines delineating the ownership of the land but on islands with a single owner or lessor, there was simply a number corresponding to the Valuation itself. It is interesting to note the two landing places on the island at the end of the dotted pathways, the main one on the south of the island, the second on the south-east

Strangely, the Last Edition OS map from the early 1900s, cites the island's area as being 23 acres, two roods and eight perches. As there has been no evidence of volcanic activity on the island in the intervening seventy years, one can only assume this latter figure is wrong.

However, all this was completely academic, as lighthouses were exempt from taxation!

Doubtless there would have been some apprehension on the island in December 1856 when the scheduled tender from Dublin failed to arrive. The small boat from Scotchport took care of all the week-to-week supplies, the mails and reliefs but, three or four times a year, a tender from Head Office was sent out with the bulky stuff – mainly coal for heating and oil for lamps. It would have been no joke in the middle of winter if the coal was running short and the tender hadn't arrived.

The *Edwin* – a St. Ives registered vessel – had indeed left Dublin with stores for Eagle Island but, when rounding the north of the country, a gale had sprung up on the 9th December and Captain Matthews had bundled into Lough Swilly for shelter. Unfortunately,

this was not the safe haven for which he had hoped and the ship was swept onto rocks at Fort Royal near the bottom end of the lough. As the *Belfast Mercury* reported, she ended up with 'several holes in her bottom,' which would have been disconcerting for anyone.

The *Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Condition and Management of Lights, Buoys and Beacons* – snappier title required – came out in 1861 but the information was submitted in 1859. It contained a few technical details about the Eagle Island stations that have not been hitherto apparent.

- The two buildings were built of dressed stone, covered on the inside with cement.
- Neither had a separate lightning conductor.
- The *usual arrangement* of a wrought-iron handrail had been built to provide a continuous conductor from the lantern to the base of the tower.
- The same character and description of the illuminating apparatus was in use as in 1835. The burners had been adapted to use pale rapeseed oil.
- The reflectors had been supplied by the Soho Plate Company (This was based in Handsworth, between Birmingham and Wolverhampton, not London!)
- The main source of ventilation was through the domes of the lanterns. There was supplementary ventilation through the blocking and floor of the lightroom.
- The total cost of the two lighthouses to 1841 – presumably this was when the building work was deemed complete – was £36,222 8s. This included the cost of the lantern and light apparatus as well as the landing places and the steps up to the towers.
- The lantern sashes were 13 feet in diameter and eight feet tall and cost £1,021 each.
- Both towers were painted white once a year by the keepers. The paint cost £82 19s 4d.
- The principal keeper at each tower had a salary of £64 12s 4d per annum; the assistant keeper was on £46 3s. This was the going rate for both grades in the Ballast Board.
- A spare lamp and burner were kept ready at each tower in case of emergency. Oil was kept in the nearby oil stores.
- The towers and dwellings were inspected by the Ballast Board annually.
- There was no fog signal, nor means of signalling to the mainland at night. A signal mast and flag were provided for daytime communication.

For the accountants among you, these are the outgoings listed in the report for 1857 and 1858. These were paid out of the Mercantile Marine Fund which charged vessels that passed the lights on a per tonnage basis. It is interesting to note the cost of the boat hire for one year, £43 3s 6d, which included paying a crew of six, was less than the salary of one assistant keeper, for whom everything was provided, with the exception of coal and other heating supplies.

Cost of	East Tower		West Tower		Combined
	1857 £	1858 £	1857 £	1858 £	1858
Small repairs	£17 6s 3d		£19 17s 1d		
Cylinders	£5 8s	£5 8s	£5 8s	£5 8s	
Cleaning stores	£2 4s 4d	£2 4s 4d	£2 4s 4d	£2 4s 4d	
Argand wicks	£1 18s 6d	£1 18s 6d	£2 2s	£2 2s	
Wages/allowance					£223 18s 10d
Coal or fuel					£72
Carriage of oil and stores					£37 10s 5d
Boat hire					£43 3s 6d
Repairs					£612 15s 5d
Incidentals					£43 2d
Total					£1262 14s

Lepidoptera

One might have thought, with its unerring propensity for hurricane-force gales and two-hundred-foot waves, that Eagle Island would not see a butterfly or moth from one end of the year to the other. It is certainly not a micro-climate that lends itself to fragile flying insects, but noteworthy examples have come to light (excuse the pun.)

In 1915, for example, J.N. Halbert, writing in *The Irish Naturalist Vol.24 No.9*, stated that a very fine specimen of a Deaths Head Moth (*acherontia atropos*) had been captured at Eagle Island lighthouse. This moth gained great publicity with its starring role in the 1991 thriller, *Silence of the Lambs*. It is not infrequently found at sea, on boats or on lightships and so, its visit to Eagle Island was not completely off the radar. Named for the markings on its thorax, which vaguely resemble a human skull, it is also one of the few lepidoptera that chirrup, marking it out as a weirdo in the wonderful world of moths.

In the *Irish Naturalists Journal (Vol. 5 No.10)* of July 1935, A.W. Stelfox reported that a female Emperor Moth (*saturnia pavonia*) had been caught by the lightkeeper, J.J. Scott, outside the lantern at three o'clock in the morning. As this moth is particularly fond of heather, which didn't grow on Eagle Island, it is presumed it was merely making a social call from the mainland.

The *Land and Water* section of the *Irish Press* of 23rd August 1962 featured a type of tiny wasp called the Persuasive Burglar, so named because somebody had translated its Latin name erroneously. This little treasure has black antennae and white spots on its abdomen and the author of the piece, O'S, had only ever come across one specimen before, and that

was six years previously in Carrick-on-Suir. (O'S was undoubtedly the lightkeeper poet and naturalist D.J. O'Sullivan, who wrote a nature column in the *Irish Press* for many years)

But now the Eagle Island lightkeepers had sent him a second one and in a most unusual place. It was *dug up out of the sand*. As O'S said, *The Persuasive Burglar is not a sand fly by any stretch of the imagination and what it was doing so far out to sea is unexplainable. A lover of the pine-wood, it seeks its prey, the larva of the Greater Horntail (or Wood Wasp) as it tunnels in the solid wood beneath the corrugated bark of the larch or fir*. It seems superfluous to add that no larch, fir, nor indeed any other tree exists on Eagle Island.

A male Emperor Moth was found on the lantern glass in April 1987. With a wingspan of a little over two inches, it is smaller than the female of the species, though both are adorned with 'eyes' like a peacock.

The Cinnabar Moth (*callimorpha jacobaeae*) is a very colourful creature that has also been spotted at many lighthouses around the country, Eagle Island included. They are on the wing in May and June and have a particular liking for ragwort. Some years they are plentiful and others they are scarce.

Another moth captured on Eagle Island is the Purple Clay Moth (*diarsia brunnea*) a reddish-brown, or sometimes blackish-brown, insect that is active in daytime as well as night and is airborne in July and August.

The Red Sword-grass Moth (*xylene vetusta*) was featured in the 2nd December 1992 *Land and Water* column of the *Irish Press*. Often found in Donegal, someone called Baynes, D.J. said, had found one as far south as Eagle Island.

With such an array of moths, it is to be wondered what on earth would attract them to a lighthouse.



Aerial view of the West Station (photo Joe McCabe)

The 1860s

Stormy Seas

The schooner *Grace Wright* under Captain Gordon put into Killybegs on 26th November, having been continually swamped by high seas from the time she reached Eagle Island. She was on a trip from Limerick to Clyde with a cargo of oats (or maybe porridge) – *Greenock Advertiser* Tuesday 3rd December 1861

The Glasgow schooner *Ceres*, on a trip from her home city to Westport with a general cargo, slipped her anchor near Inishgort lighthouse and was swept onto several surrounding islands. Prior to that, on the 12th February, a 22-year-old seaman named Donald McDonald from the Island of Uist was washed overboard as the boat passed Eagle Island – *Greenock Advertiser* Saturday 20th February 1864

Her Majesty's cutter *Stag*, on a routine voyage, servicing various coastguard stations off the west of Ireland, left Killybegs on Sunday morning and quickly found herself in the path of a hurricane. On Monday morning, while off Eagle Island, she began shipping heavy seas and two of the watch were washed overboard. One of them, holding on by a rope, was washed back onboard by the back wave but the other, a young Dubliner called Hugh Cain, was drowned. The first gig was also swept away and the cutter just managed to limp into Broadhaven Bay – *Shipping & Mercantile Gazette* Thursday 31st January 1867

The *William* of Londonderry under Captain Murray put into Broadhaven on Saturday with a dead seaman on board. The ship had reached Eagle Island on the voyage from Ardrossan to Galway, when William McIntyre fell from the foretop and was killed instantly. (According to the death certificate, he was 24 years of age) – *Greenock Advertiser* Thursday 28th May 1868

Captain Keble of the screw steamer *Glasgow*, arrived in the Mersey from Westport and reported that, at 3pm on 31st December, they had encountered a ship, bottom-up, apparently new, about three miles from Eagle Island. The vessel was about 700 tonnes but the captain could not make out any name on the stern as the sea was constantly washing over it – *Liverpool Courier* Monday 3rd January 1870

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
Philip Kennedy	1854-63		Thomas Moore	? - 1860
Michael Duffy	1855-64		Robert Redmond	1860-64
Alex Power	1863-65		James Reilly	1861-64
Frederick W. Duffy	1863-66		James Doyle	1864-67
Richard Stapleton	1865-67		Patrick Hickey	1865-67
Joseph Williams	1866-67			
Peter Page	1869-71		Tom Power (temp)	1864-65
John Murray	1869-72			

The 1861 Census – taken on 7th April that year – showed that there were 22 people living on the island, up 120% from the same time ten years previously. Twelve of these identified as males, with the remaining ten declaring themselves to be of the feminine variety of human being. As with all censuses prior to 1901 in Ireland, the actual records do not exist but we do know that all 22 were living in the four dwelling houses on the island, indicating that two houses had been either deconstructed or rendered uninhabitable since the previous census.

We have already met principal keepers Philip Kennedy and Michael Duffy, whose tenures bridged the turning of the decade. Another who probably did so was **Thomas Moore**, who appears to have been assistant keeper on Eagle Island East lighthouse in 1860 and probably for some time before that. He had been appointed a lightkeeper aged eighteen in 1854 having been *an occasional temporary keeper, being son of a lightkeeper*, according to an 1859 Ballast Board report entitled *Statement of lighthouse keepers appointed since 1854*. His father was, of course, also Thomas Moore, and his sister Louisa had married Frederick Duffy, lightkeeper, in the 1850s.

We know that Tom had served on the Fastnet, Ballycotton and Eagle Island, in that order, before he was transferred to Rathlin O’Beirne in late 1860 or early 1861 but we do not know the duration of each stay. All we can say for certain is that he was on Eagle in late 1860.

Thomas went on to become principal keeper and, with his wife, Catherine Kennedy, went on to have several children including Michael and George, who both became keepers. He died in Cork City in 1898 aged 62 years.

One of the keepers on duty on census night, was **Robert Redmond**. He was the son of Joshua Redmond and Margaret Hicks – previously mentioned – and so was well-versed in all lightkeeping duties. Born around 1831 or 1832, he had spent his early years on the large, now obsolete but still impressive, lighthouse on the highest point of Inis Mór on the Aran Islands, before the family were transferred to Skellig Michael off the Kerry coast. The family stayed on the island for seventeen years, at least – reputedly Joshua never left it once. During that time, Robert lost a brother over a cliff.

Being the son of a lightkeeper, Robert was employed as a tradesman for the Ballast Board in the 1850s before gaining employment as a keeper on 24th November 1857. His first posting was to the Tuskar Rock off the Wexford coast; his next was to the only slightly larger Eagle Island in 1859 or 1860, where he was assistant keeper.

During the latter year, he married Margaret Joynt, daughter of a local farmer from Tallagh, and during that time they begat – to use a biblical term – three children, Robert, Letitia and, possibly Ruth.

Curiously, according to his service record, Robert seems to have served at Eagle Island East lighthouse for two years, before being transferred to Eagle Island West, surely the shortest distance of a transfer in the Irish lighthouse service at 132 yards (120m). His wife, Margaret, could therefore claim the dubious honour of having a child born at each lighthouse. It is probably a very small club.

Robert served on the island until 1864 when he was transferred to the non-insular Drogheda lighthouse at the entrance to the Boyne on the east coast. But, as he will return to Eagle, we will leave him for now.

James Reilly succeeded Thomas Moore at Eagle Island West lighthouse in November 1861. It was his first posting and he was 18 years old. Not that he was a stranger to the wonderful world of lightkeeping, of course. His father John was a keeper of many years standing, although he was to disappear from Poolbeg lighthouse in mysterious circumstances in 1865. His brother John was also a keeper and would later marry Maggie Power, who would have been on Eagle Island at the time James was there, daughter of Alex Power.

James lists his birthplace in the 1901 census as county Mayo. Taking his unfortunate father's list of previous stations in hand, this must have been Clare Island.

James stayed at Eagle until June 1865 when he was transferred to Hook Head. But he was back on the island in 1875 when he married Elizabeth Ward of Sligo, the daughter of a publican.

James would later rise to be a principal keeper in his own right. In 1890, nearly thirty years after he first arrived on Eagle, he was in charge of nearby Broadhaven lighthouse, with a large, young family in tow. One likes to imagine that, maybe on a fine Sunday, after Mass, he would drive the pony and cart up to the cliffs in Gladree, gaze out upon Eagle and regale the children with stories – now sadly long-forgotten – of his first posting. He died in Cork in 1914 aged 67 years, the same age he was on the 1911 Census.

Alex Power was that rarity in lightkeeping circles – a keeper who had had no connection with the sea. He had been born and raised at Slade, near Hook Head in county Wexford and had seemed destined for the peasant farmer's life until, for some reason, he had been recommended to the Ballast Board in 1840 by none other than Col. David La Touche, grandson of the infamous Marquess of Ely, head of the Loftus family that ruled the roost over large tracts of southwest Wexford⁸.

Twenty years after entering the service, he arrived at Eagle Island as principal keeper of the West light – that is, the one higher up on the hill. 55 years old and with eight children – some of whom had already left the roost – he took over his duties on the rock in June 1863. His assistant was James Reilly and when Reilly went on leave in September, Power successfully applied to the Ballast Board to have his 15-year-old son **Tom Power** take over his duties.

In the spring of 1865, Alex and his family moved on to Inishgort lighthouse in Clew Bay where Alex died two years later and where Michael Duffy, above, would die twenty years after that. Tom, his mother and the children travelled back to Dublin to lodge with James Reilly's parents in Dublin.

Frederick William Duffy, who followed his brother as principal keeper of Eagle Island East light in September 1863, had been born around 1834. His first station had been Slyne Head in 1853 and two years later he married Louisa Moore in nearby Clifden. She was of lightkeeping stock herself, as her brother, Thomas Moore, son of a lightkeeper, (mentioned above) joined the service in 1854.

FW squeezed in Rathlin O'Beirne and Dungarvan before arriving at Eagle. His daughter Catherine can be found in the August 1864 Kilmore baptism registers. In January 1866,

⁸ From *The Irish Lightkeeper's Legacy* by Martha Power Baxter

Louisa gave birth to a boy, Thomas Richard Duffy at Termoncarra. Thomas would return to the island as a keeper in the early twentieth century.

The family moved down to Loop Head in 1866 and later to Rathlin Island and Dunmore East. Louisa died at the latter in 1889, and FW died in that Wexford maritime heartland, Parnell Street in 1899 aged 62-ish.

We know little about **James Doyle** who joined the Eagle Island East brigade in August 1864 aged 21 years. He had joined the service in March but this was his first station proper. In 1866, while on Eagle, he married Anne Waldron from Howth in Belmullet. He was still there in September 1867 but doesn't appear to be on Irish Lights' books by 1871. His father, also James Doyle, was principal keeper at Tory Island (1864) and at Crookhaven (1867), his mother Elizabeth serving as Female Assistant at the latter.

Richard Stapleton took over as principal keeper on Eagle Island West after Alex Power was transferred to Inishgort in May 1865. He had been a keeper for ten years at this stage and was his first station as the head honcho. Like Thomas Moore he had been appointed in 1854 due to his being the son of a keeper.

His brother John, roughly the same age, was also a keeper and John provided the Stapleton lineage through his son, Thomas, a lightship master, and Thomas' son John and his three sons. We will meet some of these later.

It is not known how long Richard served on Eagle but he was principal keeper on Arranmore Island in 1871, when he met up with his young assistant, Edward McCarron, who would later write about his experiences as a keeper in the book *Life in Donegal*. McCarron said Richard afforded him a friendly welcome on his arrival. However, without mentioning any names, McCarron later said that, after a very daring and heroic rescue, the PK sought to maximise his own role in the incident and brushed over McCarron's. *But he is dead now*, concluded McCarron, writing in 1893.

Richard was a keeper at Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) East Pier lighthouse when he died in 1882, aged just 49 years.

Newbie **Patrick Hickey** joined the Ballast Board in April 1865 and two months later set foot on Eagle Island as his first official posting. 21 years old, he was described as being married with no children. He was still there in September 1867 but by 1871 he was an assistant keeper at Blackrock Sligo, after which he slides out of view.

Joseph Williams joined the Ballast Board in January 1853 aged around 21 years and had risen to principal keeper by the time he took over the important lighthouse at Loop Head in 1862. Like his brother, Henry, he was the son of a painter (John Williams) and Henry would also grace the Eagle Island ranks a few years later.

There were several Williams keepers around in the latter half of the nineteenth century. James, John and William were all born around the same time as Joe but a connection has not yet been established.

After four years at Loop Head, Joe was transferred up to Eagle Island East station in 1866 to replace Frederick Duffy, who was moved to Rockabill. He was unmarried at this stage and in fact married quite late in life, in 1874, when he was in his forties. His wife was Helen

McCarthy, sister of lightkeeper John and they met whilst serving at the two lighthouses in Duncannon in 1874. They had at least two boys, Charles and Thomas.

Although he had been born in Wicklow, Joseph chose to remain on Valentia Island after his retirement. He died in Blennerville, Tralee in 1912 aged 68 years.

Rounding off the decade, **Peter Page** arrived at the Eagle Island West lighthouse in 1868 or 1869 with a young family in tow. He was the principal keeper there at the comparatively young age of 30. He was the son of a lightkeeper of the same name and had been born on Eagle around 1839, as previously mentioned. He had a brother Charles, who was also a principal keeper.

Peter had married Matilda Anderson, daughter of a coastguard in 1862, when he had been a keeper at the Inis Oirr light on the most southerly of the Aran Islands and she had been living on Inis Mór, the most northerly, which must have made for an interesting courtship. Matilda decided to have both of her children not just on the mainland but over in Killala on the Moy estuary, as her parents had been transferred there.

The 1860s



Robert Calwell sketch of Eagle Island from the NW c 1865

On the 11th March 1861 at midday, the light room of the East tower was struck by the sea smashing twenty-three panes, washing some of the lamps down the stairs, and damaging the reflectors with broken glass beyond repair. It was not simply that a wave managed to reach such an elevated position but managed to reach it in such volume that severe damage was caused. In spite of the efforts of the keepers to repair the damage it wasn't until the night of the 12th that the light was restored and then only with twelve lamps and reflectors.

Another interesting aspect of this disaster was that so much water cascaded down the tower it was impossible for the keepers to open the door of the tower. They had to drill holes in the door to let the water out. This detail is sometimes incorrectly attributed to the 1894 storm.

John Swan Sloane, former Superintendent of Foremen and Works at the Ballast Board and later Irish Lights, wrote in *The Irish Builder* of 1st November 1880 that Eagle Island is *perhaps the most exposed spot of the British Islands – in fact any place in England is quite insignificant when compared to it – and on it are the only lighthouses whose lanterns have been ruptured by the wash of the sea. In 1852 and again in 1860, this occurred. (He was out by two years and one year respectively!)*

He continued, unhelpfully not mentioning to which of the storms he was referring, though it was probably the latter, that it was *singular that portions of glass from the windward side of the lantern were driven with sufficient force against the other side to chip or take out bits of the leeward panes without breaking them – a fact that can be seen to the present day. The sea swept into the lantern at that great height, and partly filled the tower so that the keeper had to bore auger holes in the door to let the water out before he could open it. He had previously run out of the lantern and described the reflectors as chasing him down the stairs!*

It was around this time that uniforms were introduced in the lighthouse service. Although they were not practical for day-to-day work, they were expected to be worn when arriving at or leaving a station and for annual or irregular inspections.

In 1863, the Ballast Board, in a moment of enlightenment, invited the eminent scientist, Dr. Romney Robinson of the Armagh Observatory, to accompany them on their annual tour of inspection in the *PS Alexandra* and to suggest any improvements that his eminent mind could suggest. Dr. Robinson published his findings in an open letter in the *Dublin Evening Mail* and referenced the 1861 storm on Eagle Island: -

In some of the wild island stations, he wrote, the snugness of the houses contrasts strangely with the savage desolation round them and must do so more in the gales of winter. Even on Eagle Island where, on March 11th 1861, a wave broke the strong glass of one of the lanterns 250 feet above the sea and unroofed the dwellings, leaving traces of ruin all around, the tidiness of their rooms was remarkable. This must be a fearful place in a heavy gale; far worse than the Skerryvore, where the sea never rises to the lantern 100 feet lower than this. I found it so hard to conceive that glass three-eighths of an inch thick could be broken by the waves at such a height, that I suspected it must have been badly annealed; but after examining one of the fragments which I carried off, I found it right. If any less exposed site could have been found which would have suited sailors nearly as well, it is a pity that was not chosen; for I cannot be far from fearing that sooner or later, some fatal catastrophe will happen.

Dr. Robinson made two points about rock lighthouses in general but which definitely would have applied to Eagle.

The first was the lack of medical attention available. Keepers could use flags to signal the mainland if a keeper was sick or injured, he said, but it could be weeks or months before a doctor could land on the island. He suggested that each station should be equipped with a small medicine chest with easy-to-follow directions for treating such illnesses that might likely occur, such as colds, dyspepsia or diarrhoea. In this way, instant treatment, applied immediately, could save the life of someone who might otherwise be lost waiting for medical attention.

His other observance was on the education, or lack thereof, of the children at the rock stations, a problem which, he admitted, was harder to deal with. Maybe there could be

some special school set up for the children of lightkeepers, seeing as many of the boys became keepers and the girls married into it. If this was deemed impractical, he urged the board to uphold their own stated procedure whereby children were not left on rock stations for lengthy periods but were able to access mainland education. On speaking to the keepers and their families, he knew that this didn't always happen. He did, however, applaud the specially selected libraries that the Board had distributed each lighthouse.

In December 1863, the *Wexford People* published a list of subscribers to the fund to erect and maintain the new parochial churches in the county. A number of lightkeepers were to be found in the list including Edward Lezard at the Old Head of Kinsale, Michael Redmond at Drogheda and Alexander Power of Eagle Island who contributed 18s 6d.

I should mention here that, although Eagle Island ruled the lighthouse roost on the Mullet for twenty years, by the time the 1860s were done, there were five lights on and off the peninsula, testament to the danger to shipping in the area. Broadhaven had been the first to challenge Eagle's supreme dominance, its tower being built in 1848, although it was not lit until seven years later. Then in 1864 came Blackrock and Blacksod in quick succession. Blackrock is a very remote and inhospitable lighthouse marking a dangerous reef and the outer limit of Blacksod Bay. It had been proposed to build a light there many years before, but Eagle Island had been chosen instead. So inhospitable was it deemed to be, that it very quickly became a relieving station, the families being housed at Blacksod, where the fifth lighthouse, marking the inner entrance to the bay, was erected in 1866. (For those of you who are counting, there were of course, two lights on Eagle!)

The Government-sponsored *Buildings of Ireland*, which lists dwellings and other edifices of historical, architectural or social value in Ireland, says that the keepers' cottages at the West lighthouse were built between 1860 and 1865. I have found nothing to corroborate this but it would seem quite feasible if the original cottages were badly damaged by the 1861 storm.

The 2012 survey says the cottages are *a pair of semi-detached, three-bay, two-storey flat-roofed lighthouse keepers' houses, designed 1863; occupied 1901. Reroofed. Vacated, 1988. Now disused. Replacement flat bitumen felt roof on timber construction with chimney stacks centred on chimney stack having stringcourses below stepped capping, and cast-iron rainwater goods on rendered eaves. Rendered walls on cut-granite chamfered plinth. Square-headed central door openings approached by two steps with concealed dressings framing timber boarded doors having overlights. Square-headed window openings with cut-granite sills, and concealed dressings framing two-over-two timber sash windows. Set in shared grounds on outcrop.*

The overall appraisal of the buildings says that the houses were *erected to a design endorsed (1863) by Captain E.F. Roberts, Marine Inspector for the Ballast Board. They also possessed such attributes as the compact rectilinear plan form centred on featureless doorcases; and the uniform or near-uniform proportions of the openings on each floor.* One presumes that these descriptions make sense to architects.

It is not known whether the East light got new cottages at the same time. Presumably so, as the main victim of the 1861 storm had been the East light.

The Boatmen

Can anything be finer than the cliffs at Scotchport, the bold scenery of Eagle Island, Blackrock & co? Than the sea view, nothing can be more grand. The sea caverns and the beach at Pullashanta supply in themselves a study for the naturalist and geologist. – ‘Our Correspondent,’ Mayo Examiner September 4th 1871



Stunning recent photo by Sadie Reilly of the harbour at Scotchport. You'd think butter wouldn't melt ...

The lightkeepers on Eagle Island lit the lamps and performed their general duties in relative safety, notwithstanding the occasional storm from hell that threatened to blow them all off the rock. Their families shared the island until removed to the mainland in 1895. At both locations, they too passed the time without the shadow of imminent death hanging over them, as indeed do most people in Ireland.

In contrast to these groups were the local boatmen, the hardy, fearless souls whose job it was to ferry men, women, children and supplies to and from the desolate rock in some of the worst seas around these islands. Largely unheralded and always underpaid, these men lacked the social status of the lightkeeper. In the nineteenth century in particular they were poor, local men who earned a crust from fishing or farming or seaweed collecting (or

a combination of two or three of these) and were obliged to risk their lives on a regular basis to supplement their meagre income and keep the bailiff from the door.

From the establishment of the lighthouse, it was determined that the point of embarkation for the relief and supply of the lighthouse would be Scotchport, a desolate spot on the Mullet coast roughly two miles south of Eagle Island. The reasons for the naming of the place are lost in the mists of time, though locally it is believed that St. Lachtín landed here from Scotland in the sixth century with his band of merry monks and subsequently built their monastery on the balmy shores of nearby Annagh Head.

It should be pointed out that there were two different sorts of lighthouse tenders pertaining to Eagle Island and many of the rock stations.

The first were the bulky items – coal, water, oil, wood etc – which were too large to be sent out via the local boats. These goods were usually despatched from Dublin and contained supplies for many stations at a time. The steamer would make its way around the coast, landing supplies by smaller tenders kept on board. They would normally make deliveries three or four times a year.

In contrast, the local tenders were for smaller loads, for the mails and perishable foodstuffs, medicines and indeed for the transportation of the keepers, their families, tradesmen and technicians. They were much more regular, although more weather-dependent. As Josie Corish, one of the keepers' daughters, wrote in 1894, *It is hard to find anything interesting to write about on a rock on the bleak west coast, seeing no one only the boatmen who attend twice a week, which they usually do in summer, but in the winter, as many times in the month is thought good.*



The motorway to Scotchport

Scotchport had its advantages and its disadvantages.

The natural harbour is protected by a three-acre, unnamed island at its mouth. (It is sometimes possible to access it on foot at low tide but I wouldn't advise it.) Once inside

this large obstacle, the waters are relatively calm, ebbing lightly to the stony beach at the head of the bay.

This island, though, with its backside determinedly thrust to the rolling waves of the unfettered Atlantic, also creates maelstroms of white water on either side of it as the ocean impatiently seeks the coast. Submerged rocks mean the smaller south channel is completely inaccessible in the writhing torrent; the larger northern channel is comparatively calm but the currents and foaming waves still hold sway, ready to dash any boat against the treacherous rocks on either side.

Once past this island and with the Scotchport Rock successfully rounded, there is only the small matter of rowing the two miles to Eagle Island, passing Doonamo Point and the Cross Rock in a sea that can turn angry at the drop of hat. Local fishermen instinctively know when it is safe to venture out and when it is wiser to stay indoors and they have satellite information to help them decide when the boundaries between the two are blurred. Nearly two hundred years ago, even sixty years ago, meteorological aids were not quite so advanced and may have included the flight of seabirds or goats sheltering in a field.

A natural fisherman's nose for foreboding weather was often the best determination of whether to put out or not but even the most experienced sailor can be caught out by a sudden change of weather or, worst of all, a freak wave. The lightkeepers on nearby Blackrock talked of the rogue tidal wave appearing out of nowhere on a sunny day in calm waters and the stories of lighthouses along the west coast of Ireland are littered with keepers being swept off rocks, never to be seen again.

Small wonder then that, among the few manmade objects on this beautifully wild shore, there is a 2010 memorial to the boatmen who serviced Eagle Island from Scotchport, erected at the head of the small, horseshoe-shaped bay, and which begins with the simple seafarer's prayer,

Dear Lord, Be Good To Me. The Sea Is So Wide; And My Boat Is So Small.

This is followed by a list of twenty-six names, men who grimly made the journey across the wide sea in a very small boat to bring mail and sustenance to the few inhabitants of the island. These names may be found in the index.

Beneath the names of the men, the inscription reads:

Ar dheis De go raibh ma agus Solas siorai do n-anamacha

which is an old blessing asking that their souls be brought to the light of God.

Twenty-six names do not seem nearly enough to have constituted the entire force of lighthouse boatmen but doubtless some of the earlier names have been lost.

Aside from this plaque, there is a smaller one, dedicated to Martin Gallagher and Charles Williams, two local men who were drowned whilst fishing in 1911.

There is also a very old winch, rusted to within an inch of its life, abandoned on the foreshore, evidently used to haul in the heavy boat over the stones on the beach.



The Scotchport plaques, photo courtesy of Jean King

And finally, there is a rather ornate Irish Lights storehouse, wherein the boat and probably other materials were housed. It is shown on old Ordnance Survey maps as *Storehouse (Board of Irish Lights.)* and remarkably strong and indestructible it still looks. It was constructed in 1892 after the Ballast Board invited tenders to build the edifice to Irish Lights' specifications (*Notice to Builders* issued on 28th July 1892), which were signed off by William Douglass, the Irish Lights engineer who also designed the Fastnet lighthouse. The storehouse was probably the easier of the two jobs.

Eamon McAndrew says that local tradition maintains it was not the first storehouse on the site.

Local lore says the store was built twice prior by locals and was rejected each time, he says. This may have been politics – or else the old-style equivalent of Celtic-tiger shoddiness! – as three Orange Men were brought in to build it the third time. The cornerstones are Blacksod granite. The three Orange Men are said to have made their way to Termoncarragh cemetery and smashed an ancient Holy Water font with lump hammers. The remains were discovered when a committee was organised to clean up the cemetery in 2002. Anyway, all three are supposed to have met their ends within twelve months, one due to a fall from height while building the store.

According to the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, the building is a *detached single-bay (single-bay deep) single-storey gable-fronted storehouse with half-attic, designed 1892, on a rectangular plan. Decommissioned, 1969. Now disused. Pitched*

(gable-fronted) slate roof on collared timber construction with clay ridge tiles, and concrete coping to gables on cut-granite "Cavetto" corbel kneelers. Snecked limestone walls with cut-granite flush quoins to corners. Camber-headed opening with red brick block-and-start surround framing iron double doors. Camber-headed ventilation loop (gable) with cut-granite flush sill, and red brick block-and-start surround framing louvered fitting. Camber-headed window openings with cut-granite chamfered flush sills, and red brick block-and-start surrounds with fittings now boarded-up. Set in unkempt grounds.



An Teach Báid – the Scotchport boathouse still stands proudly in its unkempt grounds

And that is all the physical evidence that remains of a tale that took 130 years to tell and only finished when (spoiler alert!) the helicopter took over the tender for the lighthouse. The fact that there is any tale to tell is largely due to Eamon McAndrew, grandson of John Gallagher, who, with his late mother, painstakingly pieced together the story of the relief boats from the earliest times.

Samuel Lewis, in his 1837 *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (read the book, don't bother with the film) states that *Scotchport is the nearest port to Eagle Island, where the Ballast Board have recently erected two lighthouses at a cost of £30,000*, thereby implying that the harbour was being used for lighthouse reliefs at that early stage.

The *Connaught Telegraph* of 22nd July 1840 reported that the road from Belmullet to Scotchport had not been well-kept and was much neglected. Maintenance of the roads was put out annually to local tenders who were supposed to ensure that the rough tracks were kept in tolerable order. The fact that there was a need to maintain a road to an uninhabited and, indeed, unkempt spot like Scotchport indicates that there was a reason to do so viz. the relief of the lighthouse. In later years, the road was referred to as being *from Belmullet to Eagle Island*, when the tenders were invited. The contractor awarded the contract for relieving the lighthouse was also responsible for shipping supplies and

mails from Belmullet, so it was important that he could navigate the thoroughfare on the terrestrial part of the journey.

The first boat contractor for the Eagle Island lighthouses was one Martin Donohue of Termoncarragh. According to Jean King, who has done much genealogical work on the Gallaghers and Donohues of the Belmullet area, he was possibly the son of Anthony Donohue, who was the estate manager for Matilda Ann O'Donnell, who owned the Termoncarragh townland. The Donohues were shopkeepers in Belmullet, another reason for the Ballast Board (the precursor of Irish Lights) landing on Martin to supply goods to Eagle Island. But this may be pure conjecture.

As the contractor, Martin would have been required to make one trip every two weeks to the lighthouse, weather permitting, as well as a trip on the next suitable day. The boat often put out when weather and sea conditions were not favourable and, on occasions, was unable to get back in to Scotchport. When this happened, it usually made for Aughadoon (or Aghadoon) roughly the same distance from Eagle Island but in a north-westerly, rather than south-westerly direction.

Landing by boat on Eagle Island was always a tricky operation, even in the calmest of seas and eventually it was decided to lift people and stores onto the island by means of a hoist. The keepers and their families were obliged to sit (or stand) on a bosun's chair, a thin strip of wood attached to a chain. There was usually six feet of chain below the seat and the boatmen would hold onto that as the winch cranked up, only letting go when they were sure the transportee wouldn't end in the water. This six-foot tail was also used by the keepers above on the hoist to pull the chair in to the landing. Nets were employed to lift stores and mail up and onto the island. This meant there was no longer a necessity to make a death-defying leap from a deep-plunging boat to the pier.

This method of landing on Eagle continued until the time of the helicopter.

There may be some confusion as to the cause of death of Martin Donohue. It has been said that he died due to an accident involving a horse and cart at the crossroads in Corclough West (the last village before Scotchport) in the early 1860s. However, it states on his son James' death certificate of 1878 that he too died as a result of falling from a cart at Corclough. Maybe father and son both died in separate horse and cart accidents. Or maybe the James' death has been, over time, attributed to Martin.

Whatever way Martin died, it was in the early 1860s. It would have been natural for one of the next generation to take over the contract with the Ballast Board but for some reason, the latter chose to do business with fourteen-year-old Anthony Gallagher of Corclough. Anthony was Martin's grandson, son of Patrick Gallagher and Martin's daughter Anne Donohue. As a fourteen-year-old, he was probably an old hand on the boat anyhow and would have known the business inside out from an early age. The family story is that he was required to travel to Dublin to sign the contract, part of which allegedly stated that he should look after his grandmother, Martin's widow.

Despite, or maybe because of, his youth, Anthony made a success of the boat tender, leading a team of oarsmen over and back to Eagle Island for over 60 years with never a man lost. Not that he didn't have his trials and tribulations, of course.

After the great storm of the morning of Saturday 29th December 1894, which destroyed the dwellings of the East lighthouse, flags were hoisted to the mainland looking for a supply

of fresh water, as the tanks had been destroyed. Despite the still very rough seas, the tender was able to put out on 1st January and managed to bring the required water.

The boat has just come out this morning, wrote Lizzie Ryan to her mother on New Year's Day. ... the likes of this storm has not come for hundreds of years. Anthony tells us there is a terrible lot of damage done on shore.

Anthony is gone ashore to wire the office to know what is to be done with us.



The 'Rose of Scotchport' in the boathouse at Scotchport (photo courtesy Sean Walker)

Anthony Gallagher had other problems at the time. He was up before the Record Court in Belmullet, where he was described as being *a postman to the Eagle Island lighthouse*, which, admittedly, was a part of his job. He was being sued by John Conway, trading as A. Donohue and Sons for £30 worth of timber and provisions, that he had not repaid, despite having agreed to pay the sum off in instalments. According to the *Western People* of Saturday 20th July 1895, the judge accepted his plea of poverty and made him pay £5.

His financial woes though were only beginning and on 31st March 1900, Anthony Gallagher of Corclough, farmer, was adjudged to be bankrupt, although the contract with Irish Lights appears to have carried on as normal.

His personal life was no bed of roses either. He had married Anne Donohue of Doolough, near Geesala, (who was related to Archbishop John McHale of Tuam) in 1882 while in his early thirties and they had four children – Mary (1883), John (1884), Ellen (1885) and Martin (1887). But tragedy struck in April 1890 when Anne died of *Exhaustion after confinement, six hours*, according to the death certificate, leaving Anthony with four children aged seven and under to rear.

The story goes that, on the day that she died, Anne brought a traveller into the house and fed him at lunch-time. Afterwards, this man went on his way west to Gladree. When he returned by way of Corclough that evening, Anne was being laid out, which upset him greatly, so much so that he insisted on staying on until his kind benefactor was buried.

Fortunately, it appears, his sister Ann, who was a *great old lady*, by all accounts, stepped into the fray and doubtless Mary, (the seven-year-old) would have been expected to contribute her share too.

Maybe due to his wife's death, and not unlike many struggling Irish men at that time of history, Anthony developed a drink problem. From a young age, his daughter Mary would accompany him when he went to Belmullet to make sure that all the goods he bought were paid for, as he was liable to spend the money with his cronies in one of the public houses.

It is said that occasionally they might 'come across' a barrel of spirits – maybe one that had been confiscated by the local coastguard – and very little work would be done until the whole barrel had been emptied.

There is a tale that one such barrel turned out to be paraffin and, when it was opened beside the open fire in the old, thatched cottage, the house exploded, thankfully with no loss of life!

Throughout his life, Anthony seemed to have put very little value on land. He handed the best field on his farm to his sister, Margaret when she married Antoine 'Rua' Dixon in 1868. When his son John was still a teenager, he had to sell a score of hoggets that had been earmarked for breeding to pay off his father's drinking debts.

Martin Gallagher, Anthony's brother, was a shopkeeper in Belmullet and he invested in a 'tea venture,' probably buying shares in a tea-importing company. Anthony agreed to act as guarantor for the money borrowed, which probably contributed to his bankruptcy.

Of the children, Ellen was the first to leave the family nest, marrying lightkeeper Richard O'Donnell in 1906. By this time, the Eagle Island keepers would have been stationed at Corclough when not on duty and it is not difficult to see how the lightkeeper and the boatman's daughter might have made met. By the 1911 census, Richard and Ellen were at Dundalk pile lighthouse with two of their three children. The middle child, two-year-old Patrick, was resident with Grandad Anthony in Corclough.

(Incidentally, Richard and Ellen came back to Corclough when the former was transferred to Eagle Island and their eldest daughter, Mary, married a young assistant keeper called William A. 'Billy' Hamilton in 1928.)



The iconic rusting winch once used to hoist the Eagle Island boats up on the stony beach

A fishing tragedy occurred just a few months after that 1911 census when, on a calm night, Martin Gallagher (Anthony's younger son) and his friend Charles Williams from the next townland of Gladree were out hand-line fishing for mackerel at a place called Carraig na Reillech, which is just off the coast from the blow-hole at Pullaghantona, opposite Eagle Island. It was surmised that their frail curragh was caught in the swell or breaker of a submerged rock and capsized, throwing the two men into the ocean. Both were good swimmers (Charles had saved a party from drowning a few years earlier) but they were in the popular habit of tying the fishing lines around their legs and they both perished. The second plaque at Scotchport records this tragedy.

The eldest child, Mary, married the local rate-collector, Francis Clery, in 1916. His family had a pub on Main Street in Belmullet, where the amusement arcade stood until recently. It was celebrated even as late as the 1960s, as being the hostelry where the cows were driven through the front door for milking out the back! The family also owned land on Tallagh Hill and also where the new Aldi is located on the west side of the town.

Sadly, it was not to be a long marriage, for Francis died of pneumonia two years later. It was Mary who erected a headstone to her mother and brother in nearby Termoncarragh Cemetery.

Which simply leaves John, the eldest son, who was destined to inherit the Irish Lights contract and was probably slowly taking over as his father grew older. The last boat built by Anthony Gallagher was *The Rose of Scotchport* or simply *The Rose*. It was in service certainly by 1915 and remarkably, it is still alive and well today, residing in the boathouse at Scotchport.



The Rose of Scotchport c.1915 (Photo courtesy Eamon McAndrew)

Anthony passed away in March 1926 of bronchitis and old age and was, as stated, succeeded in the lighthouse tender by his remaining son, John. A few months later, John and the rest of the crew had a thrilling adventure on their fortnightly trip to Eagle Island, as detailed in the *Ballina Herald* of 16th September, under the headline *Exciting Sea Adventure – Erris Crew Nearly Lost*.

While a crew of six were proceeding in an open boat on the usual fortnightly voyage to Eagle Island with the post and provisions on Saturday, they encountered a terrific sea which was accentuated as they reached their destination, with the result that a landing was out of the question. Higher and higher grew the surf, and not alone was it impossible for the crew to land at the Eagle but the approach to the harbour on the mainland, from which they had set out earlier, was also rendered taboo, so suddenly did the tempest rise. The brave men were now in a most perilous plight, their frail craft being at the mercy of the lashing waves. With the elements proving so unkind, a landing anywhere would have resulted in the destruction of the boat and the inevitable loss of the crew. To keep to the

deep was their only chance of ultimate salvation, so that all thought of reaching terra firma in such circumstances were abandoned for the time being.

In the midst of their distressing condition, however, fortune smiled on them, as the Irish Lights steamer “Tharet”⁹ was passing at the time and took them aboard. One of the crew of the steamer, an expert in his craft, was lowered to bolt the open boat preparatory to windlassing her aboard, when the nearest point to reaching a tragedy in the exciting drama was reached. No sooner had the sailor completed his task, and just as the work of hoisting the boat aboard had begun than she turned mouth under and the sailor tumbled summersault (sic) into the seething water. Adept as this man was in the art of swimming, it was no easy matter for him to reach the boat again. He eventually succeeded, however, and was soon taken aboard. No further attempt was made to get the small boat aboard the steamer. Instead, she was fastened on by a hawser after the steamer and taken in tow.

The crew were landed at Ballyglass and from there proceeded by motor to Corclough. It was only when they reached there that the anxiety of their friends was allayed and their anguish assuaged. The following are the names of those who went through the trying ordeal: Martin McAndrew (coxswain) and Patk. Kilker, both of Gladree; John Gallagher and Martin Dixon, of Corclough; Harry Williams of Pollnashanthona, and Jim Dixon of Gortbrack. After partaking of refreshments at the Village Inn on reaching Corclough, none seemed the worse for so dangerous an adventure.

In case the *Herald* reporter is accused of underplaying the danger, a separate report in the *Irish Independent* stated that the men were several hours at the mercy of the massive sea before being rescued by the mysterious *Tharet*!

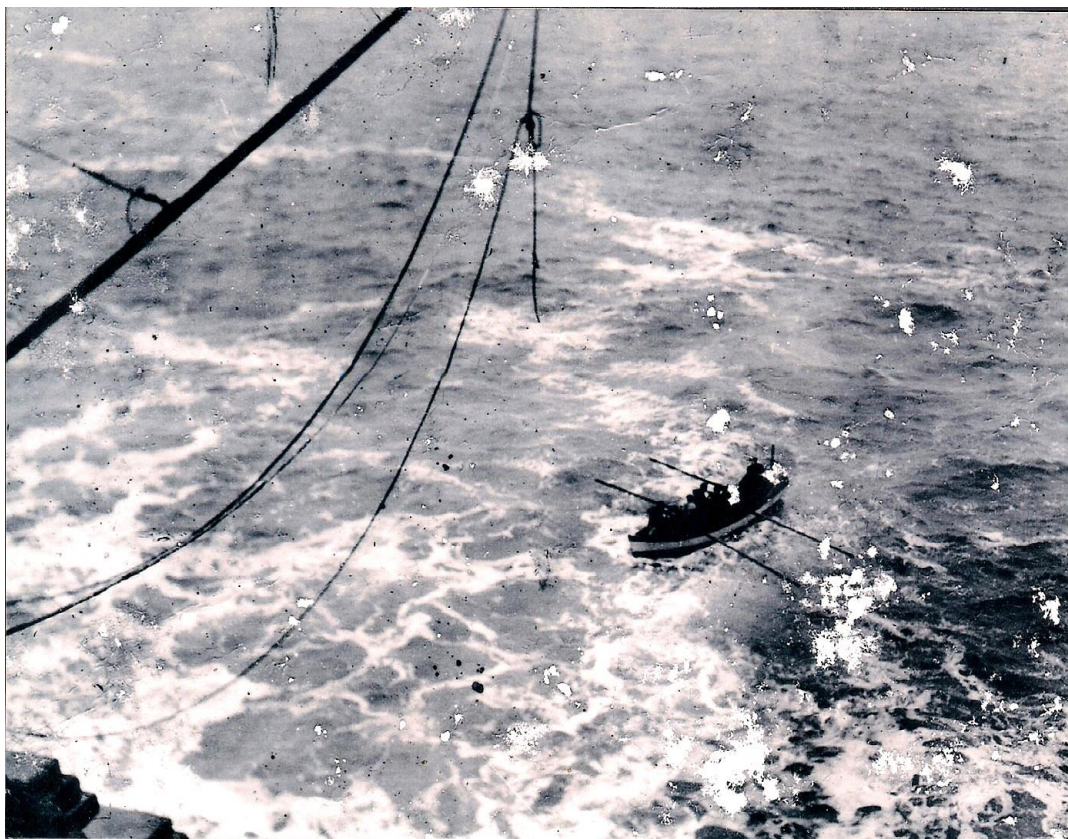
John Gallagher had *The Queen of Scotchport* built in the late 1920s specifically to service the lighthouse. As mentioned earlier, if the seas were too rough to re-enter Scotchport, the general fall-back was to head northwards to Och Lathaigh, Aghadoon (aka Aughadoon) to make land. Martin McAndrew, the coxswain and a member of the Eagle Island crew for over twenty years, was widely regarded as being an able and dexterous seaman and was widely credited as the man who got marooned lightkeepers relieved when all hope seemed lost. He also had the uncanny knack of being able to guide the small boat into a cave in the lofty Erris cliffs when storms and tempests threatened to dash it to pieces on the rocks.

Unfortunately, the *Queen* was rightly dethroned in December 1936 when a severe gale – also described as a hurricane – sprang up while she was on one of her lighthouse journeys. They could not make Scotchport, nor Aughadoon neither, so they made for a point in between called Bun na Sconce (where the grey rocks are to the north of the Council car park.) Here, men on land dropped lines and the boat was secured, with the crew making good their escape from a nasty situation. Unfortunately, the storm took the boat during the night, it was blown offshore and peremptorily smashed to tiny fragments on the rocky coast in the vicinity.

Due to this unforeseen disaster, the *Rose* was taken out of storage while a new boat was commissioned. The design of the boat was based on the traditional Achill yawl and was built by the Patten family of Saula, Achill Island. It is said that some of the timber used in the construction of the boat had been washed up on the shores of Achill, which accounts for the boat’s durability and longevity. Timber sourced from the Cecil estate in Ballycroy

⁹ Doubtless the *Tearaght*, Irish Lights Tender from 1892 to 1928. There was no Irish Lights boat called the “Tharet”

was also deployed. It was originally designed to be rowed by four men, with two others completing a six-man crew. She cost the princely sum of £300 and was called *The St. Mary*.



*The Queen of Scotchport arriving at Eagle Island (photo courtesy Eamon McAndrew)
The photo is captioned 'Nugent arriving, 1932' but there is no record of any keeper called
Nugent. A member of the Inspection Committee, perhaps? Or maybe a technician coming
to advise on the new radio beacon transmitter?*

Like his father before him, John Gallagher would travel to Belmullet on his horse and cart to collect the provisions requested by the keepers on the island and also to collect and deliver the mail. He would also give a new keeper a lift to the boat too.

There was an unfortunate accident in November 1938 that could have had extremely serious consequences. With *The St. Mary* standing off Eagle Island, crew member Patrick Kilker, a native of Gladree, was descending to the landing stage where he was helping to unload goods from the boat, when he suddenly overbalanced and plunged from a great height into the ocean. Fortunately, a quick-thinking Peter Williams, a fellow crew-member, managed to lower a grappling iron which caught Mr. Kilker fast until the boat was able to pick him up.



The St. Mary at the South landing in the late 1930s (photo courtesy Eamon McAndrew)

When not engaged in ferrying provisions and personnel to and from the lighthouse, many of the men fished together in small currachs around the Eagle Island area. In the same year as Patrick Kilker's lucky escape, the *Western People* helpfully named the seven fishermen in four currachs who battled and ultimately overcame a large shark under the lee of the island. They were Peter Williams, Patrick Howard, Michael Deane, Patrick Kilker, Martin McAndrew, Pat Reilly and Anthony Dixon, all of Corclough and Gladree. It should be noted that four of these seven names appear on the Scotchport plaque.

In July 1947, a cyclone struck the Erris coast, causing widespread havoc among fishing boats in the area. The Eagle Island rowboat was out at sea at the time and, probably guided by Martin McAndrew, managed to effect their escape by accessing the cave at Aghadoon. The six men were John Gallagher (skipper); Martin McAndrew (first mate); Peter Williams (signalman); Patrick Kilker; John Keane; and John Dixon.

In reporting the story, the *Ballina Herald* included a post-script on crew-member Peter Williams, whose name crops up regularly in the story of the relief boat.

Eagle Island lighthouse, it read, towering some 215 feet above sea level, is two miles from Scotchport. During the winter storms, the lonely outpost is often under vast volumes of sea, the billows sweeping high over the lamp tower and, often for weeks, the keepers are marooned and cut off from communication with the mainland, save by semaphoring by hand flags. In this case, Peter Williams, who lives on the adjacent coast, is extremely useful. Whenever there is an emergency message, the call flag is hoisted on the island and, in

acknowledgement, Peter hoists his own pennant at his gable-end and messages are exchanged by the swift action of the hand-flags. Whenever, through mist or fog, the visibility is bad, morse code is used by foghorn and seldom is Peter asked to 'repeat.'



L-R – John McAndrew (Corclough), John Keane (Gladree), Paddy Tom Carey (Gladree), John Reilly (Gladree), Anthony Gallagher (Corclough). The man in the cap who has no body and the man in the white jumper are presumably keepers.

According to Eamon McAndrews, Pete Williams' house is still standing in a bleak and desolate spot near the blowhole at Dún na mBó, opposite Eagle Island. Peter's elder brother, Harry, had also worked on the boat tender but had died relatively young and Peter took over.

Doubtless Peter used a telescope to read the semaphore from the island and it was this telescope that was of great help in the rescue of four local boys from a cave in Aghadoon in 1948, probably the same cave that Martin McAndrew used to make for in stormy weather. The boys had zigzagged down the cliff in search of war relics but found themselves unable to return and so returned to the cave. Local man, Anthony Dixon, in search of his sheep, thought that he saw four strange creatures far below him and summonsed another local man, Edward Lavelle. Edward, knowing Peter Williams had a telescope, ran to fetch him and Peter was quickly able to confirm that the four shapes were in fact their neighbours' boys.

By now, evening was starting to fall and nobody in the large crowd of assembled villagers dared descend the cliff and there was terrible anxiety as to the fate of the boys. However, Anthony Dixon rigged up a makeshift crane with heavy logs of timber and ships' masts that had been washed up during the war. With cable rope and a large tub attached, with a note affixed with instructions of use, the boys were hauled up one by one before night fell. Health and Safety would have had a field day but the following days were rough along the coast and no boat was able to launch, so the boys owed their lives to the two boatmen, Anthony Dixon and Peter Williams.

The boat contractor, John Gallagher, was interviewed at Scotchport by Radio Eireann on 20th June 1949. In those days, interviews were recorded by cutting a record there and then



in the field! Interviews had to be done in one take and so the interviewer had to be on his toes, particularly when the interviewee, like John in this case, was not particularly garrulous! These old acetate recordings have since been digitised by RTE. The interviewer was Seamus Ennis, who began by asking John if he had enjoyed his trip out to the island that day.

Oh begod, I enjoyed it splendid today. If we got every day like it, we'd be all right. I believe you get it rough enough sometimes?

Ah yes, very rough.

Tell me, John, do you own the boat, you do?

I do.

You have a contract with Irish Lights?

Yes, yes.

How often do you go out?

Well, every fourteen days if the weather is good and then, as I told you before, the next chance, the first chance we get to get in afterwards.

Yes well, I suppose sometimes you'd be kept in three weeks or a month?

Ah yes, man, in the wintertime and longer, often. You have to be watching on account for it then and bring in stuff from Belmullet and returning it again too.

Yes well, do you bring a big load out?

Well, it doesn't be so big indeed.

What do you carry? Provisions?

Provisions of all sorts, meat and everything.

The mails?

I don't carry the mail. Postman carries the mail. Kilroy.

I see. Well, John, how long are you at it? It's in your family, I believe, is it?

It's in our family. My great-grandfather got it.

Well, that's a big record.

Well, it seems they didn't find any fault with us, so. That's all I'll say now. (laughter)

It seems, from that short exchange, that post was no longer being brought directly out to Eagle Island. It was probably dropped off by the postman, Kilroy, to the keeper onshore in Corclough.

There is another acetate recording in the RTE archive of John reciting the words of the extremely long song, *Belmullet Town*.



Photo at the boathouse courtesy Anthony Gallagher, taken in the 1950s. From left to right – possibly Anthony Dixon of Aughadoon; John Keane; possibly Tommy Keane (the boy); Anthony Gallagher; Patsy Kilker; and Martin Gallagher, right.

John Gallagher died suddenly in February 1951, aged 65 years. His death certificate shows his occupation as a 'boatman,' while the notice in the local paper, described him as an Irish Lights Contractor. According to his grandson, Anthony, the family story goes that he went out to the back of the farm one beautiful February morning, to view the sea and the weather, to determine whether a relief boat was possible that day. It was as

he gazed across to Eagle Island that he had a massive heart attack and died.

His widow, Nora (nee Devers) (*below*) became the official boat contractor, a position that she held until the helicopter service from Blacksod commenced in 1969.

It was a condition of employment on the boat tenders that not a man should be over fifty. On the Eagle Island tender, it was very rare that any of them were under fifty! They also didn't get paid until Nora Gallagher got paid by Irish Lights, which occasioned a few grumbles from some of the crew, who were very much dependent on the additional income.



It was during the fifties that a Seagull outboard engine finally replaced the oars on the *St. Mary*, despite the fact that engines had been the norm on many relief boats on much calmer coasts for decades. At Rockabill, on the much more placid east coast, for example, the motor boat had been in operation since 1911. In the south-west of Ireland, where conditions could often be as bad as those off the Mullet, the early local tenders were replaced by Irish Lights steam ships based in Castletownbere that would sail as close to their destinations as possible (the Fastnet, Bull Rock etc) before launching

their own smaller boats. That the Eagle Island service survived for so long on oar-power is testament itself to the brave men who made that perilous journey for so many years.



The St. Mary at Scotchport in the late 1950s L-R Pat Kilker, Harry Dixon, possibly! (Aughadoon), A. Gallagher (Corclough West), Richie Gaughan (Gladree), Paddy Ruddy (Corclough), Martin Gallagher (Corclough), John Keane (Gladree). Standing at the back, Bernie Lavelle (Corclough) The young lads were evidently just visiting! (photo courtesy Eamon McAndrew)

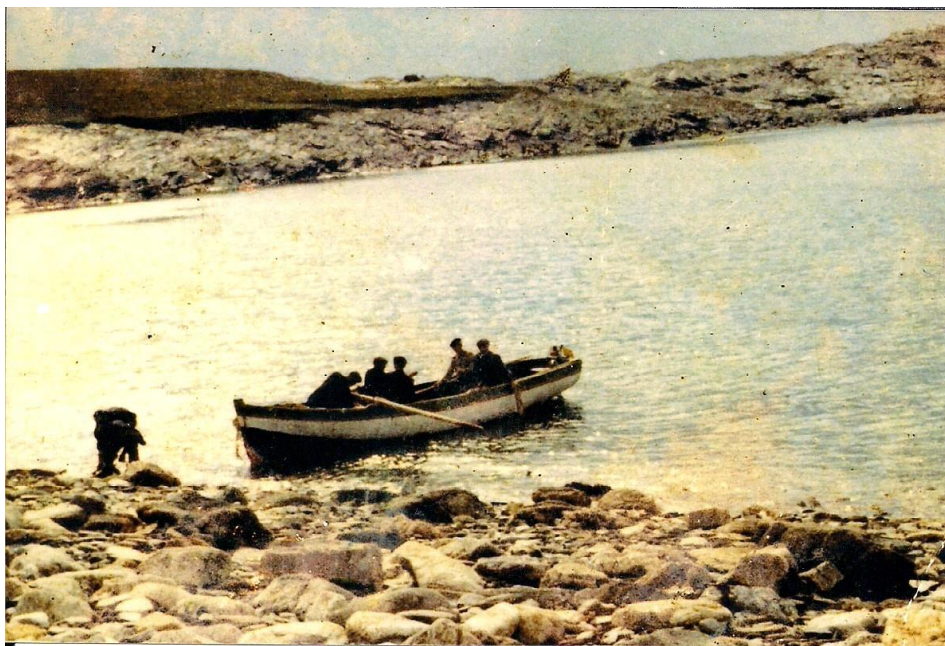
By 1956, it was being reported that the local Irish Lights contractor for Eagle Island would soon be replaced by a steamboat based at Galway that would service the entire north-western seaboard. This never came to pass.

Eugene O'Leary, an SAK on Eagle in the late 1963 / early 1964, says that if you fell in the water, the Eagle Island boatmen wouldn't rescue you. *There was a lot of superstition back then*, he says. *The theory was that if you took somebody out that rightfully belonged to the sea, then the sea would one day come and take you.* This story can, of course, be refuted by the rescue of Pat Kilker by Peter Williams when the former fell in the water in 1938.

They would pick you up on Eagle, Eugene relates, *and would not say a word to you. In total silence, they would row all the way back to Scotchport. You got out of the boat yourself and then they winched up the boat over the stones and into the boathouse. Only when the boathouse door was shut would they come over to you and shake your hand and welcome you ashore.*

Pat Kilker, whose name regularly crops up in relation to the lighthouse tender, died in 1977. He was, said his obituary in *The Western People*, *a man who spent the most years of his life with the sea and knew every rock and wave-breaker from Erris Head to Annagh Head.* A native of Gladree, who had reached an advanced age, he was for many years a crew-member on the boat that brought supplies to Eagle Island Lighthouse, skippered by the late John Gallagher, Corclough. He was also a member of the Irish Coast Guards who

manned the stations at Annagh, Erris and Ballyglass. He was a man with a great personality, always in good humour and was the parish's most popular bachelor.



The St. Mary jockeying for dock position at Scotchport in the late 1960s. L-R Anthony Gallagher and John Dixon (Gortbreac) on shore, John Keane (Gladree), two unidentified men in the middle, Pake McIntyre and possibly Pat Kilker (photo Eamon McAndrew)



John McIntyre, son of boatman Pake McIntyre, remembers an incident when he was roughly nine years old and not long home from school. *It was a beautiful summer's evening in Gladree and I was coming out of the field, he says. I saw Anthony coming back down the road, so we exchanged pleasantries and he asked me to let my dad know that they'd be leaving for Eagle in about an hour and a half.* One suspects that such an informal method of communication went out with the fairies when the helicopter came in!

Pake McIntyre

There is a tantalising possibility of a link between the Scotchport tender and one of the great works of Irish drama in the persona of James (Seamus Mor) Shevlin, whose name appears on the Scotchport plaque.

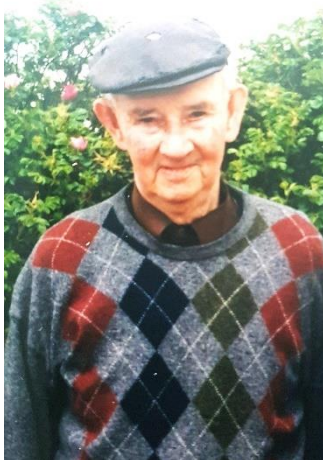
Seamus, who was born in the early 1840s, lived at Ardonne or Ardowen on the east side of Termoncarragh lake, although there is a possibility that they originated in

Termoncarragh itself. A powerful man, by all accounts, his wife Norah (Lavelle) died young, leaving him with three sons, John, Anthony and Edward, who was known, for some reason, as the King.

One of the more amusing stories concerning Seamus was that one time, apparently, he was given drink on Eagle. Returning home, the boat passed over a shoal of mackerel and Seamus impulsively dived into the middle of them. When he was fished out on an oar, he still had his dúidin (clay pipe) in his mouth.

Naturally, with four men in the house and not much money coming in, there was an element of rough-and-rowdiness in the home and there is a story, completely uncorroborated, that, during a potato-digging session in the garden, a row broke out. One of the sons ended up hitting Seamus with a shovel and knocked him unconscious. Fearing he had killed his father, the son did a runner. Naturally, Seamus survived.

It is interesting to note however that, shortly afterwards, John Millington Synge, whilst staying at Geesala, only twelve miles away, wrote his great play, *Playboy of the Western World*, which tells the story of a young man in the west of Mayo who arrives in a small town, claiming to have killed his father. Only the father was still alive ...



John Reilly, born in Gladree in 1914. He worked on the Eagle Island run during the 1950s and 1960s (photo courtesy his granddaughter Laura Reilly Gaultiere) Not to be confused with another John Reilly who returned from England in the late sixties.

Other names on the plaque include:

Paddy Tom Carey, who was a Gladree man, born in 1907. He was a great lover of the sea and a cheerful, good-humoured man. He died in 1979 aged 72;

Tom Keane of Gladree, a fisherman who was on the tender in 1935 and his son, John who was on the Eagle run in 1947 and died in 1988. John's son, Tom, was the man who erected the plaques;

three generations of McAndrews from Gladree – Johnny, son Martin, a cox, and grandson John;

Jamesie Dixon, who was originally a Corclough native but moved to Gortbrack as a young man. His son was also on the boats;

Mike Gaughan, who lived in the house nearest the Scotchport boathouse on the southern side;

Anthony Dixon of Aughadoon, who was a local songwriter and also was on the boats with his brother, Harry;

Anthony James Gallagher, a Corclough man who died in the early 1980s. A well-known raconteur and singer, his mother was of lightkeeping stock, being a Murray from Pickle Point;

and Anthony Rua Dixon, who married Margaret Gallagher (Anthony Gallagher's sister) in 1868. His son, Martin Rua Dixon, who was also a rower, was therefore John Gallagher's cousin.

John and Nora's son, Anthony, remained involved with the operation of the lighthouse boat, while another son, John Patrick, joined Irish Lights. *The Rose* continued to be brought back into temporary use whenever repairs were necessary on the *St. Mary*. Eventually though, it was withdrawn permanently to the storehouse at Scotchport, where the sealed conditions preserved it beautifully. Unfortunately, some other users of the storehouse continued to leave the doors open and left wet articles of clothing draped over the boat's side and she had to be sent away for repairs.

Shortly after the helicopter service took over, the *St Mary* was put into storage. In 2009, she was sent back to the Patten family in Achill for renovating. She is now occasionally launched for deep-sea angling – but only in fine weather.



The St. Mary today, looking better than ever, with Eamon McAndrew in charge. (photo courtesy Blacksod Lighthouse Facebook page)

There were of course some cargoes that couldn't be handled by the Scotchport crew. Bulky and heavy items like coal, water and machinery were delivered three times a year by Irish Lights tenders, such as the *Princess Alexandra*, the *Nabro* and the *Isolda*. These boats would load up in Dublin and then travel to a certain part of the coast with supplies for three or four lighthouses on board. So, for example, it was reported in the Donegal Democrat in November 1936 that the *Isolda* had arrived in Killybegs with stores for Rotten Island, St. John's Point, Eagle Island and Rathlin O'Beirne.

Albert Arthur Bestic is a name well-known in Irish maritime circles. He was a third officer on the *Lusitania* when it was torpedoed in 1915 and captain of the *Isolda* when she was bombed in 1940. The Germans must have hated him. He wrote an excellent account

(*Kicking Canvas*) of his first ship journey aboard the *Denbeigh Castle* and was a regular contributor to national newspapers with his thoughtful observances of maritime life.

In one such article in the *Belfast Telegraph* in 1923 – a year after he joined Irish Lights – he described in detail the operation to unload stores at islands of the western seaboard. It is worth reprinting it almost in its entirety as it gives just a small inkling of what the job entailed: -

*Scenes on Western cliffs
Landing stores in a gale*

By A.A. Bestic Tuesday 18th September 1923

Little is known to the general public of the constant care and attention which have to be given to the lighthouses and lightships which mark the many dangers to navigation round the Irish coast. These lights have not been taken over by either of the Irish Governments, but are still under the control of the Board of Trade. Of the three vessels employed on this duty, the Irish light steamer Alexandra is the largest, and her share of the work entails her in making complete voyages round Ireland. Reliefs, water, oil, coal and stores have to be delivered, and very often the execution of such is not without considerable danger. On the East coast most of the lighthouses are placed on the prominent headlands on the mainland, and, as this side of Ireland is more or less sheltered, the work can be carried out fairly regularly.

But this is far from being the case on the West. Here, islands and huge rocks abound at a distance of five miles or so from the mainland, some obviously thrown up by eruption in a forgotten era, and the task of landing upon them is often an extremely difficult one owing to the prevailing swell of the broad Atlantic. The Alexandra, when about to deliver stores, goes as close to the island as safety permits, usually a distance of a hundred yards or so. Perhaps she has been lying for a week or ten days at the nearest port waiting for suitable weather to dodge out and visit this one particular rock.

Lonely and desolate it looks, its cliffs rising sheer out of the ocean to a height of about 700 feet in places, it defies the terrific gales for century after century. Millions of seabirds wheel round uttering raucous cries without ceasing. Here and there black caverns yawn, into which the sea hurls itself with untiring efforts. Woe betide the ship which should hit such a place on a stormy night.

But on the cliffs, looking strangely out of place in such wild surroundings, stands a lighthouse, its white tower contrasting vividly with the black rugged rock. Figures looking like pygmies appear at its base. Signals are interchanged asking if all are well, and if the landing is safe. In the winter time the reply generally runs to the effect that the landing is not safe but possible, and it lies with the discretion of the captain as to whether he will make the attempt. But the stores are perhaps overdue, and he may not have such a chance again for a week.

A boat is lowered from the ship, looking like a cockleshell in the big swell, and the loading of the all-important oil is begun. This is a very different matter from the loading of a boat which is steady, and can only be successfully carried out by men accustomed to such work.

With the vessel rolling and pitching in addition to the boat alongside rising and falling, the greatest care has to be exercised in transferring the heavy casks of oil from one to the other.

But the loading completed, the most difficult task has yet to be done. When the boat gets to within about forty yards of the rock, her crew drop a boat anchor attached to which is a long line, and then continue paddling cautiously towards the boiling foam which surrounds the island. When they are about twenty feet away they hold on to the anchor rope in the bow, and the lighthouse men fling them another rope which is made fast at the stern.

The huge swell comes thundering in and sweeps like a miniature mountain up the side of the cliff, but the ropes aided by the oars, keep the boat from being swept to destruction. The next instant, the swell recedes, this time leaving a hill downwards towards the streaming rock. Once again, the ropes and oars do their duty.

Meanwhile a derrick on shore has been swung out directly over the boat. If the lighthouse keepers number only three, some of the crew have to be landed in order to assist in heaving up the oil. Waiting until the boat has risen on the top of a swell, the first man out grasps the derrick rope, and the men on shore winds as fast as they can on a hand winch until the

human swing is high enough to be swung onto the landing.

The utmost skill is required in discharging the oil from the boat. The cask is hooked on when the boat is on top of a wave. A moment later she falls from six to ten feet as the swell recedes. The men strain at the oars in order to get her clear of that cask; should she catch her gunwale underneath it when rushing upwards on the next wave, the result would mean disaster.

Captain Bestic (left)



Many are the thrilling stories told by these lighthouse men. Exposed to all the furies of the elements, the fearful storms which tear across the open space of the Atlantic, their

lighthouses shake and vibrate, until the keepers sometimes begin to wonder if they will stand the strain. The size of the seas can better be imagined than described by the fact that two years ago the lantern of the lighthouse on Eagle Island, standing 210 feet above sea level, was smashed in by a sea during a winter hurricane.

The 1870s

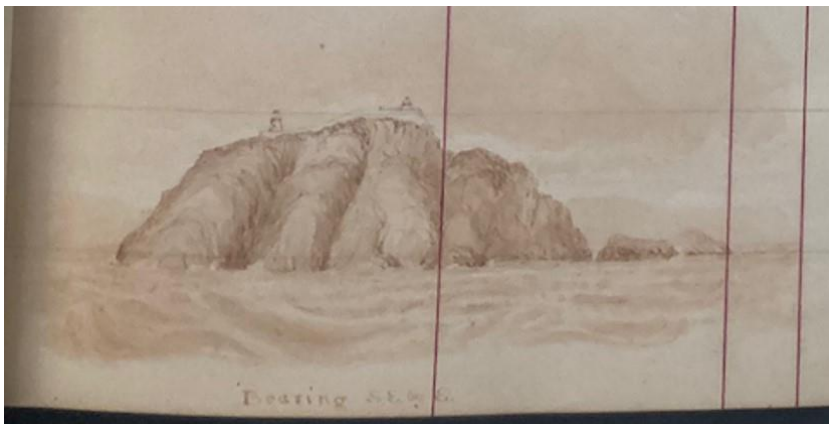
Stormy Seas

On a journey from Troon to Ballinahill (probably Clifden), the *Kate*, with Captain McLaughlin in charge, was obliged to heave to due to a WSW gale when passing Eagle Island on 23rd August. The following day she shipped a sea which washed away all the movables on deck, stove bulwarks on both sides etc. She turned back and put in at Rathmullan in Lough Swilly on 27th – *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, Friday 1st September 1871

Captain McLernon of the schooner *William Akin* reported a fatality that happened on a voyage from Galway when he arrived at Liverpool on 1st July. The boat left Galway at 8am on 27th June and proceeded without any problems until they were passing Eagle Island, where there was a heavy sea with a strong wind blowing WNW. The vessel was labouring badly and he told William McCartney of Bangor, county Down to try the pumps. While McCartney was in the act of drawing a bucket of water to do so, the vessel gave a lurch and he fell overboard. At once the captain ordered the helm put hard down and they stayed at the location for a considerable time but did not see anything of the unfortunate man three minutes after accident – *Liverpool Journal of Commerce*, Wednesday 3rd July 1872

The brigantine *Koodoo*, laden with coal, put in at Tobermory in the Inner Hebrides at 4pm on Christmas Eve. Under the leadership of Captain Keay, she had been making for Limerick from Troon but only got as far as Eagle Island, where four days of heavy gales from WNW tore her mainsail, blew away her topmast staysail, stove in the boat and washed the water casks overboard – *Lloyds List*, Tuesday 28th December 1875

Her Majesty's Coastguard cruiser *Victoria*, long stationed at Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) encountered a severe storm on Wednesday 3rd January as she passed Eagle Island. Two of the crew were swept off the deck into the ocean but were immediately swept back onboard again. But unfortunately, the First Mate, William Sheppard was washed overboard and drowned. The deceased was the third son of a coastguard officer of Rye in Sussex and left a widow and six children to mourn his loss – *Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*, Saturday 13th January 1877



*Robert Calwell
sketch looking
from the WSW*

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
John Murray	1869-72		Rickard Hamilton	1871
Peter Page	1869-71		Andrew Leary	1871
John Whelan	1872		Neil Ward	1871
James Reilly	1875		John Kennedy	1872-76
Charles O'Brien	1879-80		Henry Williams	1877
			John Harrison	1879

As a substitute for the 1871 Census, the returns of which were actually destroyed by the Government shortly after being taken, due to personal privacy concerns, we do have the *Alphabetical List of all Officers and Men in the Service of the Commissioners of Irish Lights, giving their ages, dates of joining and distinguishing those who are in receipt of the additional sum allowed in respect of the Life Assurance Scheme on 30th Day of June 1871*, which won the Best Original Screenplay award at the 1872 Oscars. The Victorians certainly loved their succinct titles.

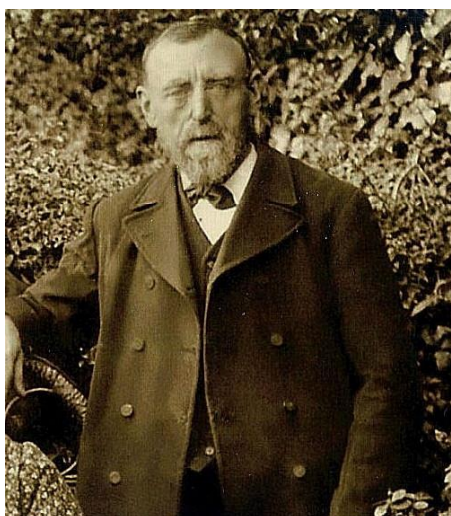
In effect, the book is a list of all Irish Lights employees, whether as keepers or on lightships, in the buoy depots, on the tenders etc. on that particular date in 1871.

(The Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin – aka The Ballast Board – had taken over responsibility for general lighting and marking of the coast in 1810 from a disinterested Irish Revenue Board. The 1854 Merchant Shipping Act divided the Corporation into two separate bodies, one for maintaining and improving Dublin port, the other for doing the same in regard to lighthouses, buoys, lightships etc around the coast. Strangely, they had the same personnel and same constitution! However, in 1867, the severance was completed, with the Commissioners of Irish Lights made responsible for all the sea lights around the coast, with the exception of those in Dublin port.)

From this record, we know that the four keepers in situ on Eagle Island on 30th June 1871 were **John Murray** (PK) and **Rickard Hamilton (18)** (AK) at Eagle Island East and **Peter Page** (PK) and **Andrew Leary** (AK) at Eagle Island West. The census statistics say 17 people were resident on the island.

John Arthur Murray was another local boy, reputedly born in Atticonau (various spellings) a couple of miles east of Belmullet in 1843, give or take. Son of a farmer, Felix Murray, he somehow managed to get into the lighthouse service in 1861. He had married Kate Ward in 1868 while stationed at Oyster Island in Sligo. He was apparently the PK of the East light. Their second child Daniel was born on Eagle Island at the end of 1869 and Mary Ann was also born there in 1872. Anthony Gallagher of the boat tender, was one of her sponsors at the baptism.

After travelling the country, including another long-haul trip to Ballyglass, John retired back to Atticonau, where the 1901 and 1911 censuses list him as a farmer. His death certificate in 1930 lists him as an 89-year-old ex-light keeper.



Rickard Hamilton

His assistant at the East lighthouse was the unusually named **Rickard (or Ricard) Hamilton**. Born in 1845 or thereabouts in Goleen, county Cork, he was just a couple of years younger than his PK. The unusual first name derives from a Spanish grandmother who was brought to Union Hall by his naval grandfather. As a youth, he had joined the Royal Navy but bought himself out and joined the lighthouse service in August 1866. Two years later, he married Honoria O'Sullivan in Kerry and then began a tour of the country, taking in Eagle Island for two or three years in the early 1870s. John, his son, commonly called Jack, born in Belmullet in February 1872 – in the baptismal register, Rickard is called 'Dick' – and two other boys, David and Daniel, all became lightkeepers.

The lighthouse journal for 1872 show that he requested a few days of absence in February of that year, doubtless connected in some way to Jack's birth. The Hamilton lightkeeping dynasty finally came to an end when Al Hamilton – another Eagle Islander – was made redundant due to automation in 1994.

At the West lighthouse, we have already met the PK, Peter Page, the pickled pepper picker, and so that only leaves rookie **Andrew Leary**, 21 years of age and with only two years of service under his belt. A Dubliner, despite his youth, he was already married a year, his wife Anne even younger. Evidently, he didn't stick with the lightkeeping, hightailing it back to Dublin where he raised a large family, working as a labourer in the healthier environment of a chemical factory.

A possibly-related Andrew Leary was an assistant keeper at the Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) East light from around 1858. It was he who discovered the body of Patrick Lalor, keeper of the Kingstown West lighthouse, one night in 1861, who had died from natural causes. The following year he was transferred to Slyne Head (Andrew Leary not the deceased). On Eagle Island Andrew's marriage cert, it states that his father was also called Andrew but was a farmer. Maybe they were father and son and Andrew senior had given up the job by 1870?

We do not have exact dates for **Neil (or Neal) Ward**'s tenure on Eagle Island. Born in the Rosses, Donegal, he joined Irish Lights as a 23-year-old in 1867 and was stationed at Tory in 1871, where his son James was born. He was then apparently transferred for a while to Eagle Island and later Oyster Island in Sligo, before returning to Tory, where he opened a shop.

His son, James, became a great Gaelic scholar and advocate of all things Gaelic, from poetry and music to step-dancing. He features in the Doegen recordings¹⁰ of 1928-31, which recorded the dialects of Irish speakers from all around the country. Séamus Mac an Bhaird – as he was known – even incurred the wrath of Austin Clarke, who wrote a curse poem about him, beginning:

¹⁰ Ulster Doegen Recordings: Séamus 'ac a' Bháird (uhi.ac.uk)

*Black luck upon you Seamus Mac-an-Bhaird
Who shut the door upon a poet
Nor put red wine and bread upon the board;
My song is greater than your hoard,
Although no running children know it
Between the sea and the windy stones.*



Part of a famous 1912 photo on Tory Island. On the left is Neal Ward, former Eagle Island keeper; his daughter Ellie beside him; Roger Casement; and Séamus Mac an Bhaird, who cut his teeth on Oileán sa Tuaidh

John Whelan was the principal keeper in 1872. He was the son of a coastguard of the same name and was born around 1837. His father was posted to Crookhaven in county Cork, from where John jnr joined the Ballast Board in 1857. He married Ellen Hill, daughter of a coastguard, in 1860 and toured the country. He was in Killybegs in 1871 and at the Copeland Islands in 1874, so his stay on Eagle Island lay between these two dates.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, they say. On 28th June 1872, the gulls on the island had a bit of vocal competition, when Ellen delivered a baby daughter, named Josephina. Less than ten weeks later, John and Ellen's nine-year-old daughter Jane was carried down and laid to rest in the little patch of land reserved for burials on the island. She had suddenly developed scarlatina (aka scarlet fever) and less than twenty-four hours later she was dead. Her death certificate, like that of so many children of lightkeepers on rock stations, simply stated '*no medical attendance.*'

Incidentally, the Irish Lights journal for 1872 p.168 notes that keeper John Murray submitted an account of expenses incurred for the employment of a temporary keeper during W. Whelan's absence. There was no W. Whelan on the books in 1871, so it is probable the initial letter was merely a typo.

John Kennedy (35) probably had little thought when he rocked up to Eagle Island in the early 1870s, that he would end up sticking around. He had been born at the Old Head of Kinsale in 1848, son of a lightkeeper and was therefore used to the nomadic life. However, a local girl, Julia Kate Gallagher, soon put a stop to his gallivanting. Although she was from Corclough, she was no immediate relation to Anthony Gallagher, also of Corclough, who ran the boat tender, though doubtless the families were related in some way. They married in 1873.

A daughter, Jane, was born unto the couple in 1874 and a son Patrick in 1876. Being a local girl, Julia had the children on the mainland, rather than risking the island births. After a stint on Blackrock, Mayo, John was back on Eagle again in the 1880s, with two daughters, Jane and Bridget, being born in Corclough in 1882 and 1888.

Former keeper Seaghán O Bríaín, son of keeper John O'Brien and keeper's daughter Jane Kennedy, writing in *Beam* in 1996 at the age of 84, said *My grandmother was born in Belmullet and at the age of six weeks was brought out to Eagle Island, where she was hoisted onto the island in a basket. She was five years old when she next came ashore to Blacksod. She told me she jumped off the sidecar in terror at the sight of a tree in Binghamstown.*

(As his grandmother was Julia Gallagher, she would not have spent five years growing up on Eagle, so it is more probable that the story relates to his mother, Jane Kennedy.) After retirement from Irish Lights, John and Julia ran a shop in William Street, Belmullet. John died in 1912, aged 63; Julia was a widow until 1930, when she died aged 79.

We know already a little bit about **James Reilly** who married one Elizabeth Ward in her native Sligo in 1875, while he was serving at Eagle Island. He was 32 years old and his father, John, had also been a lightkeeper. James' first station had been Eagle Island back in 1861.

Henry Williams had joined the service in 1862 at the relatively late age of 27. He had married Jane Buchanan whilst serving at Youghal in 1867 and, ten years later, their son Robert was born, not on Eagle Island but at Kilmore Rectory. Now, there's posh. Henry also participated in the bird survey of 1880 from Eagle Island.

Around this time there was also a James Williams keeping light at Blacksod and Joseph Williams (Henry's brother) at Ballyglass. The chief coastguard at Ballyglass was called William Williams.

John George Harrison married his wife in Granard, co. Longford, while serving at Eagle Island in August 1879. His father, George, was also a lightkeeper before he joined the Beatles. Poor J.G. rose to be a principal keeper but his world came tumbling down in 1894 when in charge of Slyne Head lighthouse. Himself and another keeper, JF Harris, were dismissed for gross dereliction of duty for drunkenness and deserting their posts. They claimed that the assistant and the temporary keeper who had lodged the complaint were notorious drunkards and fighters and could not be trusted. An investigation was launched as were numerous writs, but the dismissals held, though tempered with a certain amount of compromise.

John was to be found on the 1901 and 1911 censuses as an Inspector of Lighting (whether in lighthouses or street lighting is unclear) He died in Dublin in 1929.

Charles O'Brien joined the team as Minister for Music around 1879. Born around 1844, he had been 22 years old, when joining Irish Lights, taking up his post at Wicklow Head in 1866. From there he moved to Haulbowline where he married Jane Dowdall, daughter of a policeman. He later served at Clare Island, Eagle Island West and Drogheda, where he was recorded in 1885. At some time during the following five years, the family moved to Montreal, where Charles died in 1904.

The 1870s

Belmullet 10th June 1870

The north-western part of the barony of Erris, washed by the mighty billows of the great Atlantic, forms a picture whose features are as varied as they are magnificently wild and romantic. Blacksod Bay, with its numerous indentations and bold headlands, flanked on one side by the giant mountain Slievemore, and on the other by Belmullet town, distant direct about twenty miles, forms a deep, spacious and capacious harbour, in which any number of shipping of the heaviest burden could safely ride at anchor. To the left of the entrance in the bay is Blacksod pier and lighthouse, the latter a modern, neat and handsome structure; while away still, in the far west, rises Blackrock, from depths profound, and rearing its huge, precipitous and coruscated sides to a height of nearly 400 feet from the surface of the water. On top of this rock, a lighthouse has been created, whose revolving flash, when seen at midnight's silent hour, appears like some fiery meteor, flash after flash succeeding each other with frequent and regular precision.

The sloping sides and verdant fields of Tarmon hill come next in view, from the top of which is presented to the wondering gaze one of the grandest spectacles of Nature. As far as the eye can reach seaward, the boundless ocean appears in all its majestic grandeur, now dashing with roaring violence against the side of some cliff, or murmuring with sullen moans in the depths of one of those gloomy caves so frequent on the coast or smoothly laving the beach with its sparkling waters, gliding quietly on its watery way. Bingham Castle, on Elly Bay, looks very imposing at a distance, on account of its romantic situation and rare, verdant lawn, gradually inclining to the water's edge. But on nearer view it will be found that a great part of the building is dilapidated, ruinous and fast yielding to the hand of time, a monument of departed greatness.

Facing more northward, and leaving the two islands of Iniskea behind, you approach the lake of Cross, now celebrated for its established racecourse. A range of low sand-hills separates it from the burial ground, the last repose of poor suffering humanity, lying on the very brow of a precipice, on the brink of which are the remains of an ancient monastery, which in former times had been a repository of piety and devotion, where the lamp of religion burned in all its purity, long after the toil, turmoil and wholesale destruction that followed fast and close, during the dark ages.

Passing from Cross and leaving Annagh House, a solitary spectacle on the lonely shore, environed by sandhills, the traveller will observe from the cliffs of Tarmoncarra a view unrivalled and unsurpassed, and beyond the power of my feeble pen to describe. Eagle Island with its two lighthouses, one crowning the brow of a perpendicular rock about 200 feet high and over which old Neptune when in angry mood, often throws his foaming spray

with fearful violence, enveloping the island in a dense cloud of appalling majesty. Flocks of birds haunt the sides of the cliffs, mingling their discordant notes with the fitful, deafening noise of the agitated waters, while cattle and sheep graze peacefully on the verdant sward.

From 'Our Correspondent,' *The Mayo Examiner*

Arts and culture

But enough, for a while, of the mundane births, marriages and deaths. What about the finer things in life? Art, literature, music and so forth. Is there a cultural angle to all this sea spray and concrete?

Well, it just so happens that the 1870s was the golden era for culture on Eagle Island. It all started with an admiral of the navy who really wanted to paint maritime pictures.

Richard Brydges Beechey was born in London in 1808, the youngest of eighteen children fathered by Sir William Beechey RA, who somehow found time to paint portraits as well. Richard went to Naval College and then joined *HMS Blossom*, which happened to be captained by his brother Frederick. It was a baptism of fire, or rather, ice, as the *Blossom* undertook a three-year trip around Cape Horn and up to Point Barrow, Alaska, the furthest point into the Arctic that any non-Inuit had been at the time.

Richard joined the maritime survey of Ireland in 1834 before retiring thirty years later. This freed him up to concentrate on what he loved best – painting.



"The Irish brigantine 'Sligo' and other vessels in rough weather below the Eagle Island lighthouse, county Mayo." (36 x 54 inches) God knows how he managed to paint in that lumpy sea.

He was certainly a marine artist of some note, and his later paintings appear to be derived from sketches he may have done whilst on active duty. It has been said of him that his love of painting stormy scenes probably prevented him from achieving the popularity that his artistry deserved. An example of this was *"The Irish brigantine "Sligo" and other vessels in rough weather below the Eagle Island lighthouse, county Mayo,"* which he completed in 1874.

In 1885, he painted the scene again, only this time without the *Sligo* and other vessels (unless that piece of timber floating by is part of that flotilla!) And thank God he did, for it is one of the few visual portrayals of the now defunct East lighthouse that we have. The East lighthouse is the taller of the two, naturally enough.



"Eagle Island off Erris Head, W. Coast of Ireland" by Admiral Richard Brydges Beechey. This painting, which measures 30 x 45 inches, sold for over €12,000 in 2005

Continuing Eagle Island's venture into the rarified world of haute couture, *The Dark Colleen. A Love Story* was published in 1876. Its author went by the unusual name of 'The author of the Queen of Connaught.' Presumably the third book would be ascribed to 'The author of the Queen of Connaught and The Dark Colleen. A Love Story.' Et cetera, et cetera.

The book appears to be a Victorian melodrama about a girl growing up on Eagle Island who falls in love with a French sailor after she nurses him back to health following a shipwreck but, oh, the shame, he is only using her, the blackguard, and she escapes back from France and he follows her, after realising the error of his ways and he dies, probably in her arms. My apologies for completely ruining the book for anyone rushing out to buy it. It is actually still in print and the author's name, Harriet Jay, has been revealed.

The Eagle Island of the book is described as being off the west coast of Mayo but there the similarity with our Eagle Island ends. Ms Jay's island has *craggs, mountains, glistening peaks that point to heaven; stretches of green pasture and growing corn; black moors and wastes of heather; streams and mountain loughs glimmering before the eye.* It also has

villages and a King. It is quite possibly more likely to be based on that other Eagle Island – Achill – south of the Mullet.

Poetry was keen to get in on the act in the 1870s, as per this beautiful stanza plucked from *A Pleasure Trip from Belmullet to Inniskea* by C.B., published in the *Connaught Telegraph* on 14th September 1878, in its 'Original Poetry' section.

*And now for Eagle Island, the Flying Cloud is bound,
With its light-house, steep and dangerous, 400 feet profound
From water's edge to tower top, a work of human skill;
Yet spray and wave dash over it, such is God's blessed will.*

Evidently designed to showcase the beauty of the Mullet scenery, the poem also mentions passing Inis Glora as well as Eagle Island, a rather roundabout way of getting from Belmullet to Inniskea via Blacksod, but we will put that down to poetic licence, along with the doubling of the height of the tower above the water.

Surrounded by such beauty in paintings, literature and poetry, it is little wonder then that lightkeeper Charles O'Brien should be inspired to fill the air of Eagle Island with music that doubtless enchanted all those who heard it. In a testimonial in the *Western Gazette* in September 1879, he lauded the craftsmanship of Messrs. Campbell and Co., musical instruments makers of Glasgow.

Eagle Island, West Belmullet, co. Mayo, Ireland, Aug. 8, 1879

Gentlemen, - I have just received the Melodeon with which I am well pleased. It is real good value for twice the price; indeed, I'm so favourably impressed with the instrument that I take this opportunity of giving you an order for another instrument of a different sort – viz. a Cornet, for which I enclose P.O.O. for 25s. A friend of mine has one at the same price from Butler (Haymarket, London) and I am anxious yours will bear favourable comparison with it. – I remain, gentlemen, yours truly,

Chas. A. O'Brien

One may be sure that there were fierce arguments on the island over whether the children wanted to hear Chas' version of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor on the melodeon or the cornet. Maybe he treated them to both.

The South Landing

Off the coast of Antrim, there were twin lighthouses until the first decade of the 20th century. Roughly aligned NW/SE, the North tower was situated at the West Maidens and the South tower naturally graced the East Maidens. Just to be confusing, naturally.

On Eagle Island, there were two landing places for boats, one on the very southerly point of the island, the other on the eastern side. The East landing led down from the East tower but because the South landing led to the West tower, it was also known as the West landing, depending on to whom you were talking. But for reasons of conformity and geographical accuracy, I shall refer to it as the South landing.

The South landing is sheltered by a rock, though not from westerly and south-westerly swells. If you come across a photo or a video of Eagle in a storm, the white plumes coming from the front of the island are coming from the South landing. Despite its relative volatility, it was the more used of the two landing places.



Last edition OS map of Eagle Island. Note the footpaths (F.P.) leading from the Light Ho. (West tower) and the Tower (ruined East tower) to the respective landing places

There is a roughly-hewn stone pier here and even rougher stone steps leading up the cliff, both built during the 1830s. Large boats do not land here. They approach the island and then launch smaller boats which have the lightness and manoeuvrability to get in close. The aerial hoist, which was anchored to the sheltering rock and was used for winching people and goods up to the top of the steps, is of course no more.



Even on relatively calm days, access to the pier can be tricky. Photo by Sean Doyle of the Lough Ree Sub Aqua Club in August 2020. Sean says they left a coxswain in the boat and clambered onto the pier in a five-foot swell. He describes the old pier as 'covered in barnacles and quite worn.'



The pier, with the sheltering rock just offshore, upon which the anchor of the aerial hoist was secured (photo by Sean Doyle of the Lough Ree Sub Aqua Club August 2020)

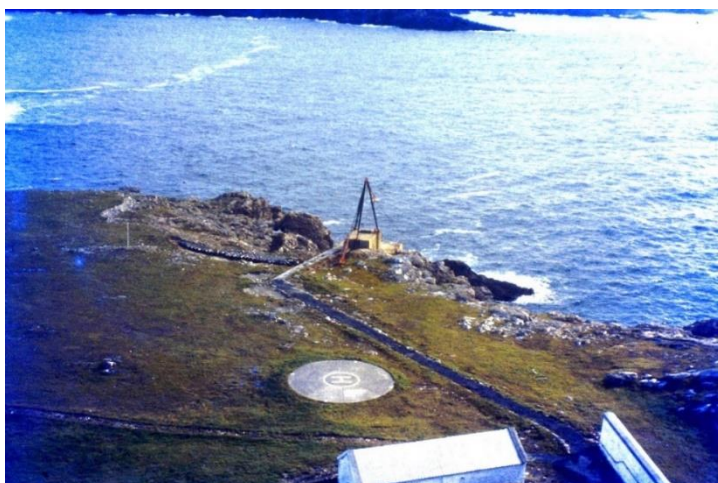


The steps up to the island proper. Halfway up, on the right, can be seen the rusty stanchion, now horizontal, which evidently once helped to string a rope handrail (photo by Sean Doyle of the Lough Ree Sub Aqua Club August 2020)



At the top of the steps is the building supporting the old aerial hoist, traces of which are still visible (photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022)

View of the old aerial hoist from the top of the island (photo by Al Hamilton 1970s) Landing stores by boat was always a chore.



There was an aerial hoist at the South landing place for landing barrels of oil, says Al Hamilton. One end was on a rock a little way off the island and there were two places to drop them. The boat would come in under the hoist and attach two barrels at a time which would then be winched up to the lower landing place. Then later, they'd be winched up further to the higher landing place. And that wasn't the end of it. You then had to bring them up to the oil stores which were located halfway up the island. They're gone now of course. And there were more stores further up. It was back-breaking work.

Tearaght and Eagle were the two stations that had an aerial hoist, remembers technician, Knut Janson, who joined Irish Lights in 1969 when the helicopter hadn't quite come in. You had to make sure you jumped on the board right on the top of the wave, otherwise you got a wet bum!

Noel McCurdy, who served on Eagle in the early seventies, was there when a coal delivery came in. Ted Sweeney, down in Blacksod, had the contract for delivering the coal, he says. The boat would come in and the coal would be hoisted up onto the jetty five bags at a time. Then we took them up to the stores in the motorised barrow that they had. The gas thing was, when the five bags of coal came up, who'd be standing on top of them, holding onto the wire, only Ted! And him well into his sixties! So much for health and safety back then!



Giant blocks and capstones lie strewn around the path up to the lighthouse (photo by Sean Doyle of the Lough Ree Sub Aqua Club August 2020.) Frank Pelly was there after a storm in the late 1980s. "The one-and-a-half ton capstones had been flung as far as 200 feet," he said. "One was even embedded in the shed wall. You wouldn't throw confetti as far."

The 1880s

Stormy Seas

Captain Cerase Givacchino, master of the coal-laden barque *Teresina Stinga*, reported that his vessel, bound for Buenos Aires was currently breaking up in Lackan Bay, north of Killala. They had left Leith on 31st August and, at noon on September 8th, they were passing Eagle Island. The weather was clear and the wind was NW, as was the very heavy sea. At this point the pumps were sounded and it was found that they were making water. All hands were then employed on the pumps until they arrived in Lackan Bay at 1pm on the 11th September, after losing one man overboard while passing Downpatrick Head. In order to safeguard life and property, they tried to run the boat ashore but it grounded in shallow waters 500 yards from the shore. Boats from the mainland arrived and took off the crew but it was feared that one bad storm would see off the boat – *Lloyds List*, Tuesday 20th September 1887

The Keepers

Robert Redmond (1880-1882) PK
Charles O'Brien (1879-80) PK
John Roi Hamilton (1881)
Matthew Healy (1881-84) PK
John Kennedy (1882-88)
Henry Aquila Stocker (1882-83)
Charles Meehan (1883?)
Daniel Ignatius Rooney (1884-86)
Daniel Hawkins (1885-86)
Bernard Cunniam (1885)
Hugh Keeny (1885-87)
William Glanville (1889)

(N.B. Keepers were probably at the station for more years than stated. The years above represent their definite residence on the island.)

On 3rd April 1881, the Irish census showed fifteen creatures identifying as belonging to the species homo sapiens, with an eleven to four ratio in favour of those who claimed identity with the male variety, dispersed among the four inhabited houses of Eagle Island.

We have already met Robert Redmond, Charles O'Brien and John Kennedy so we need not repeat their mini- biographies in this section. However, briefly, we will mention that an Irish Lights document detailing the miscellaneous expenses incurred by the organisation in 1881, lists the first two as being recipients from this fund. Robert Redmond was paid £19 8s 2d and Charles O'Brien received £40 11s 6d, far and away the highest total paid out to the sixty keepers and lightshipmen on the list. Much of this was probably due to

transport and accommodation to the fraud trials the previous year, though it seems Charles had other expenses too.

Clare Mary Hamilton was born in July 1881, daughter of **John Roi (or Roy) Hamilton**, who does not appear to be linked to either of the two William Hamilton lightkeeping dynasties of the 20th century. The Hamiltons were catholic and both from Antrim. Clare's mother, Mary nee McSparran wasn't taking any chances though. She had the child in Lanarkshire.

Like most keepers, John and Mary criss-crossed the country during his career, their children being born in counties Dublin, Clare, Wexford and Antrim. John Roi – his father was similarly named – died in Cushenden in 1928.

As we will see from the Irish Lights fraud trial, the two principal keepers on the island in 1880 were Robert Redmond and Charles O'Brien, serving at the east and west lights respectively.

Charles was of course the melodeon and cornet player who brought so much joy to the music lovers on the island. His son, William, was baptised at Kilmore in September 1879.

Robert, who had served there as an assistant keeper in the 1860s was back as a principal, 48 years old now and with a family in tow. The bird migration survey was just starting up and Robert was a keen contributor. With his wife, Margaret (Joynt), from Tallagh, just north of Belmullet, it is likely that some of the children may have resided there rather than on the island.

He was at Eagle Island from at least 1879 to 1883. In 1884, he was transferred down to Blacksod where he continued to participate in the bird survey. Shortly afterwards he retired and died of stomach cancer at Tallagh Hill in 1888.

Matthew Healy (19) replaced Charles O'Brien as principal keeper at the west tower in 1881. The son of lightkeeper John Healy, Matthew was born in 1846 and did his best to help keep Irish Lights well stocked with keepers. Joining the service in 1866, he married Elizabeth Broderick from Dursey Sound (the shore station for the ill-fated Calf Rock) the following year and daughter Catherine was born ten months later. She later married another keeper, Charles Meehan. A son, also called Matthew, became a keeper, as did another son, Patrick. Daughter Elizabeth, born at Eagle, in 1883, married Peter Lavelle, another famous name in Irish lightkeeping. Over eighty years later, Elizabeth Healy – or 'Granny Lavelle,' as she was known – wrote down the circumstances of her birth.

I was born on Eagle Island on the twenty-third of the third, eighty-two, she said. March is generally a blustery month; the weather was bad and my mother was unable to get ashore in time for my arrival. Twenty years after, the boat contractor, Anthony Gallagher, long since dead, gave me an account of it. He was married that morning and the celebrations were in full swing; the lighthouse was decorated with flags in his honour, so he thought, and he was very pleased my father had remembered. However, late that evening, the flags were still flying, so they suspected something was amiss. The boat's crew left the gaiety behind, started off for the rock, brought a nurse with them and landed there at nightfall, just as the storm was about to break. They got back safely but there wasn't another landing for three weeks. I was born that night.

There is a slight discrepancy on the dates of Elizabeth's birth and Anthony Gallagher's wedding. Elizabeth's birth cert says 23rd March 1882, whereas Anthony got married on 25th March. Doesn't diminish from the story one bit. Maybe the flags only went up two days after the birth because there was a slight concern about mother and/ or baby. After

a lapse of 20 years, Anthony could well have contracted birth and marriage into the one day. Or maybe, which was more likely, her birth date was actually 25th March. The birth was only registered by statutory declaration to the registrar on 11th July by her father!



Matthew Healy and his wife Elizabeth (nee Broderick) They had married when Matthew was a young keeper stationed at Calf Rock

Elizabeth also gives us a description of life on Eagle Island.

There were two stations on the Eagle then. The families used to collect in one house in the evenings, the ladies sewing, making quilts, knitting crocheting et cetera. Charles Meehan who was my godfather (and later my brother-in-law) was an excellent violinist and brought it with him and when he played a waltz his baby godchild swayed to the music and when he played a reel or jig baby changed the tempo and danced about on someone's knee. My father taught the boys and had class every morning. He had gone to school to the Christian Brothers in Dun Laoghaire until he was eighteen and gave them great help with their studies. My father taught us to play the concertina and to sing. He had a pleasant tenor voice. Mother was a good singer and Pat an excellent step dancer, Lancers, Valetta waltz, military two step. We had all to do our party piece and learned to waltz and the Highland Fling!!

Evidently, the music didn't stop when Charles O'Brien left. Many lightkeepers were quite proficient musicians – sure, hadn't they a lot of time to practise?

Charles Meehan (29), who married Elizabeth's older sister, Catherine, in 1887, when he was at Roancarrig and the Healys were at Dursey Sound (minding the temporary light on Dursey Island after the Calf Rock light was washed away), had been born in Donegal in 1847, son of a farmer. He joined Irish Lights in 1870 and soon was promoted to assistant

keeper. He arrived at Eagle in the early eighties and stayed for two years. As evidenced by Elizabeth Healy's reminiscences above, he was a fine violin player.

His travels took him to Galway, Antrim, Kerry and Waterford, before retiring to Mountcharles in his native Donegal in 1907 after finishing his career at Dunmore East. He died in 1925. His son and grandson, both named Charles, also became lightkeepers and served on Eagle.

In September 1882, **Henry Stocker** joined the crew at the East tower with his wonderfully exotic second name Aquila, which is the Latin for 'eagle.' If anyone could be said to be of true lightkeeping stock, it was Henry. Born at the Hook lighthouse in 1832 to lightkeeper, Edward, he married Susan Christie at the Maidens in 1854, when he and her father Isaac were stationed there. (Isaac, incidentally, was credited with supervising the construction of the lighthouse at Blacksod in the mid-sixties) Henry and Susan's son, Leonard, would go on to become principal keeper at Eagle Island at the end of WW1.

Henry stayed two years at Eagle, before being transferred to Tory Island, arriving just in time to help the few survivors of the British warship *Wasp* which foundered on the island in calm weather in 1884.

In sharp contrast, **Denis Ignatius Rooney** who, with wife Ellen Gillen had two children Walter (1884) and Denis (1886), had little or no connection with Irish Lights. His father had been a merchant and he had been a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Rosses Point when he married local farmer's girl Ellen in 1877. After Eagle Island, he went to Blackrock (Mayo lighthouse) for four years. When his last son Laurence was born in December 1891, he was back in Sligo working as a labourer. By 1901, Ellen was a widow. There are a lot of unanswered questions concerning his career trajectory.

Daniel Hawkins, principal keeper at the East lighthouse in 1885 and 1886, is another who lists his place of birth as county Mayo around 1844. His father, though, was a coastguard. His brother Charles was also a principal keeper.

Daniel had a son (also Daniel) born on the rock in 1886 and also took part in the bird surveys in 1885 and 1886. He retired to the Wirral in Cheshire after superannuation and died there in 1935 aged 81.

There is a curious document in the Irish Lights archive. It is a memorial from all the Irish keepers, requesting that the company look into the pay scales for English keepers compared to those in Ireland and looking for parity between the two. Attached to the memorial is a typewritten list of names and the stations at which they served.

Both the memorial and the list are undated but they are filed under late 1894 or early 1895, in which a line in the register for that year states that the memorial and the list have been received. The problem is that the list of names and stations comes from a decade earlier – late 1884 or early 1885. There are certain giveaways – Dursey temporary light is listed as having keepers, and that station closed when the Bull Rock opened in 1889; Hugh Dugan is listed and he died at Duncannon in 1889 etc.

Notwithstanding the memorial, the list can be dated, as I said, from late 1884 to, more probably, 1885. Among the list of signatories are Hugh Keeney PK and D.T. Rooney AK at Eagle Island West; and at Eagle Island East, Daniel Hawkins PK and **Bernard Cunniam** AK.

Unfortunately, not only can I not find a reference to Bernard in any lighthouse archives, I can't even find the name in the civil records or census returns. A Richard Cunniam kept

lights around the country during this period but Bernard doesn't appear to have ever existed. Maybe he was an apparition that helped Daniel to tidy up and keep the light.

Hugh Keeny (27) was a Donegal man who came to Eagle Island in the late 1880s. His sister had married into the Redmond lightkeeping dynasty; he himself had married Susan Breslin in Killaghtee, Donegal in 1875. Hugh had joined Irish Lights as a 21-year-old in 1868. His son James was born on Eagle in 1887.



Born in Kinsale in 1865 to a coastguard, **William Glanville (63)** was a young keeper at Eagle Island in 1889 when his son Michael was born there. Three years after joining the service in 1884, he had married Delia O'Malley when he was stationed at Slyne Head in 1887 and would be found at Wicklow Head by 1890. His CIL service record states he spent three years at Eagle, so the intervening period was probably spent here. His brother John was also a keeper.

Delia Glanville died of TB in 1904 at Oyster Island. Will married Jane Dixon who lived near Ballyglass where he was stationed in 1909. He also served at Blacksod. He retired in March 1925 and died six months later.

Son Michael ended up with at least fifteen siblings.

William Glanville in Irish Lights uniform

The 1880s

In 1883, William Douglass constructed a new landing place and derrick on Eagle Island. This was probably the East landing. It is unlikely that he did any of the actual physical work himself, for he had been appointed Engineer in Chief of Irish Lights in 1878. In training for his work on Eagle Island, he had designed and supervised the erection of the Wolf Rock lighthouse off the coast of Land's End in Cornwall, Les Hanois light in Guernsey and two lighthouses in Ceylon. It would appear that this experience stood him in good stead for his great triumph on Eagle Island. Later on, somewhat as an anti-climax, he would design a little-known lighthouse off the south-west coast called the Fastnet.

On the Irish Lights website, we are told that, *at a Board meeting on 15th June 1883, Inspector Captain Boxer recommended the abolition of one tower at each of the two tower stations Eagle Island and Slyne Head. Trinity House doubted the practicality of marking dangers with sectors from one light and requested further information. In July 1886 the Inspecting Committee reported and recommended a first order triform fixed oil-gas light with red sectors to clear dangers; again, Trinity House requested further information. Plans were forwarded and the Engineer Mr W Douglass attended a meeting with the Elder Brethren and by January 1887 Trinity House had granted statutory sanction to discontinue one of Slyne Head's towers and to introduce a triform oil-gas light with a red sector landward. It appears that consideration to reduce Eagle Island to a one-tower station was postponed.*

This is the first and, perhaps only, indication that Eagle Island's East light was under threat prior to the December 1894 storm. Advances in lighthouse technology meant that sectors could be incorporated into rotating lights, as in Galley Head, which meant one light could do the work of two.

In December 1886, a terrible storm broke over Ireland, as detailed by the Heritage service of Irish Lights: -

On the 8th December 1886 a violent storm swept across Ireland and Western Europe. Meteorological observations from the time report a Gale Force 12 (Hurricane Force) wind from the SW on the West Coast of Ireland. The damage around the coast was catastrophic.

The Irish Lights Minute papers from the time shed light on the havoc wreaked by the storm on Stations around the coast. Between 9th-16th December, reports came flooding in from Lightkeepers and Masters of Lightships on nineteen stations around the entire coast of Ireland. These ranged geographically from Eagle Island to the Codling Bank, and from Inishtrahull to Hook. Undoubtedly the West Coast was hit the hardest with dwellings receiving the most damage. Miraculously there were no reports of injuries to Irish Lights personnel or their families.

Daniel Hawkins, on Eagle, wrote to his employers in Dublin on 13th December, detailing the damage caused by the recent storm.

I beg to report that during the gale on the night of the 8th instant, the following damage was done by the sea to derricks at East landing.

Gaff belonging to lower derrick taken away out of the clutches.

Wheel of upper winch broken as shown in sketch at back of this letter.

And one of the crutches for large gaff broken off.

Cement platform constructed by Mr. Muldoon at East landing block torn away.

And six of the concrete steps slightly damaged.

I beg to submit dimensions of gaff for lower derrick which, if supplied, could be shipped in its place and worked independent of the upper winch.

Your obedient servant.

Daniel Hawkins.

Two weeks after the storm, Daniel Hawkins' son, the aforementioned Daniel, was born, not on Eagle Island but in Belmullet.

There was another bad storm in November 1888 though, on an island synonymous with bad storms, it barely warranted a line in the papers. The *Inishtrahull*, a passenger and cargo ship built three years previously in Glasgow, reported that the lighthouse on Eagle Island, *although over 280 feet high, (sic) was ... washed over by the foaming billows*. Six years later, the ship was lost with all 26 hands off Kilkee county Clare in the same storm that did for the Eagle Island East lighthouse.

With regards to the storm of 1886, poor old William Douglass must have been tearing out his hair, if he had any, at the news that his beautiful, new, state-of-the-art landing stage on Eagle had sustained considerable damage. The Heritage Service, as well as furnishing Daniel Hawkins' account of the destruction, also went so far as to provide photographs of the letter and the beautiful sketches created by the artistic principal keeper: -

All Communications on the business
of the Irish Lighthouses Commissioners to
be addressed

"The Secretary"
To the Irish Lighthouses
Commissioners,
Westmoreland Street,
Dublin.

Quote Office Number.

Eastland Lighthouse,
December 1886

Sir



I beg to report that during the
gale on the night of the 8th instant
the following damage was done
by the sea to derricks at East
landing—

Gaff belonging to lower Derrick taken
away out of the crutches; Wheel of
upper Winch broken as shown in
sketch at back of this letter; and one
of the crutches for large gaff broken
off. Cement platform constructed
by the Muldoon - at East landing block torn
away - and six of the concrete steps
slightly damaged.

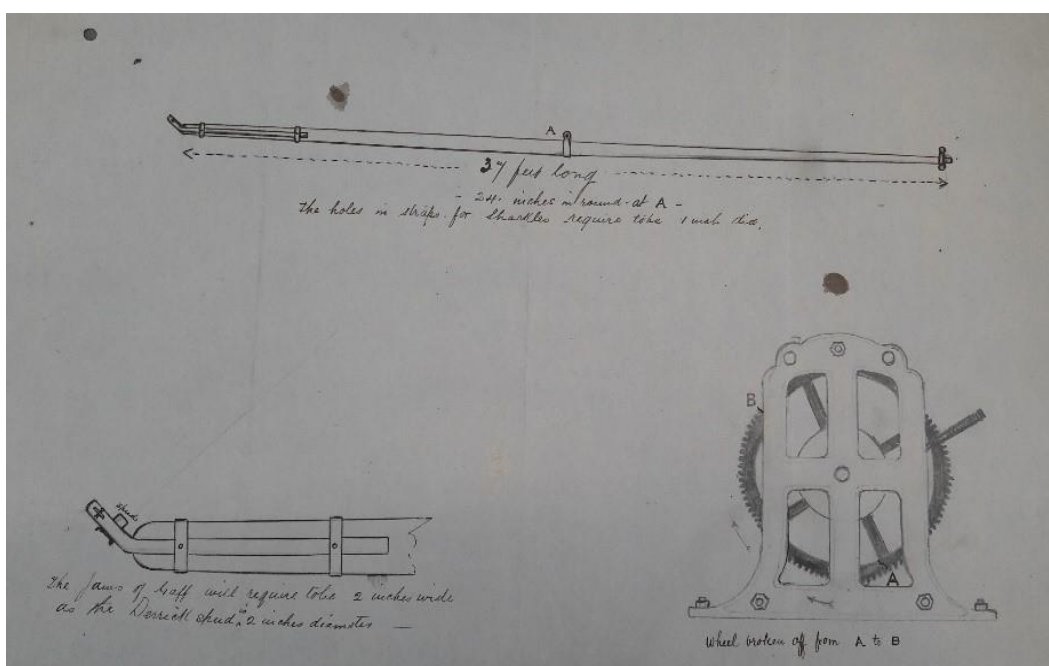
I beg to submit dimensions of gaff
for lower derrick, which, if supplied
could be shipped in its place
and worked independent of
the upper Winch.

I am Sir

The Secretary
Irish Lighthouses Office
Dublin

Your obedient Servant
Daniel Hawkins
per Kaper

1886 storm letter from Daniel Hawkins



Sketches of storm damage sent by Daniel Hawkins to Irish Lights December 1886

The Irish Lights Fraud Trial

In May 1880, Henry J. Robertson, with an address of 24, Bachelors Walk, Dublin 2 (trading as Fishbourne and Co., carriers) and Anthony Tyner, of 23, Grosvenor Place, accountant with the Commissioner of Irish Lights, were jointly hauled before the courts for conspiring to defraud the said Commissioners of diverse sums of money and also for actually defrauding the Commissioners of diverse sums of money. It's difficult to see how they could have committed the second crime and not the first but I'm no legal expert. Tony Tyner was also accused of falsifying accounts in Irish Lights to cover up the conspiracy.

The case, as outlined by the prosecution, was as follows: for many years, the Commissioners had employed Fishbourne and Co. as carriers. When the quantity of goods to be shipped from the Irish Lights depot in Kingstown (Dub Laoghaire) to any lighthouse or lightship around the coast was large, the Commissioners sent their own tender, but if the shipment was small enough and needed to be moved rapidly, Fishbourne was the company that moved it. Henry Robertson was the sole owner of the company.

The contract seemed to work well. Mr. Robertson sent in the invoices on a monthly basis, and they were ratified by the first and second clerks of Irish Lights prior to payment.

Up until the end of September of 1878, all seemed in order and the invoices were roughly at the same level that they always had been. Then, it appears, Mr. Robertson got into financial difficulties. His fortune was lost and he became bankrupt. At roughly the same time, the invoices paid out to the company by Irish Lights rocketed. Large invoices in the last three months of the year brought the annual total up to £1,900; the following year it

went into orbit at over £4,000, despite the business remaining steady. And in the first five weeks of 1880, £1,042 was paid to Fishbourne for carriage.

It was the prosecution's contention (m'lud) that around the time of the marked increase in invoice amounts, the system suddenly changed in Irish Lights. Whereas before, two clerks had checked every invoice, from October 1878, Mr. Tyner took over the Fishbourne account alone.

The method of payment in general was that Mr. Tyner would present the invoices to the cashier and the cashier would issue cheques for the amount. There were two types of cheques – the general cheques for under £50 and the special cheques for over £50. It was alleged that Tyner always fulfilled the Fishbourne account with general cheques, so as not to alert suspicion.

In total, the prosecution said, the amount that Irish Lights had been defrauded amounted to between £4,000 and £5,000.

Michael Kirwan, storekeeper for the Commissioners at Kingstown, then itemised the goods that had been sent out to various lighthouses around the country and compared them to the invoices that Mr. Robertson had sent. At Eagle Island, for example, he said, two table lamp burners apiece had been sent to the two lighthouses on 17th July 1879 and nothing else for July. The invoice for that date charged for carriage of four casks of oil totalling £24 1s 9d. On the 10th July, there was an invoice for carrying ten casks of oil to Belmullet, with an amount of £32 13s 8d. There was of course no lighthouse at Belmullet but it was the post town for Eagle Island. There was also a second invoice for transporting four casks of oil on 17th July for £24 14s 9d.

Into August 1879 and Mr. Kirwan stated that nothing was sent out from the stores in Kingstown for Eagle Island. Yet, twelve packages were invoiced as being carried there on 9th August, with a charge of £26 18s 10d. and, on the 27th August, eleven casks were invoiced for £28 16s 4d. When this was multiplied out to every lighthouse around the coast, it made a pretty penny.

There appear to have been two different trials in 1880 – the first in May seems to have been some sort of pre-trial to determine whether there was a case to answer. There was, and the actual trial took place in June.

Principal keepers from around the country were called forth during the pre-trial to give very similar evidence i.e. that none of the goods invoiced had been received at their particular station. In the pre-trial, Charles O'Brien, the melodeon and cornet player and PK of Eagle Island West, gave evidence, reported in the *Freeman's Journal*.

(He) deposed that he received a suit of clothes from the stores at the beginning of July last. He had no account of four casks being received, but he could not swear to it, as the store book for '79 and the first quarter of '80 was missing. The receipts showed that no such thing as four casks of oil were received in July. He did not receive ten casks of oil in July neither. A small package of stationery came through Fishbourne's in August, and he thought he paid a couple of shillings for that.

Mr. Murphy, (QC, prosecution) – *The account furnished by Fishbourne was, 17th July, 4 casks, £24 1s 9d; 10th July, 10 casks, £32 13s 8d; August 9th, 12 packages, £26 18s 10d; August 27th, 11 casks, £28 16s 4d.*

To witness – Did you get any of these casks?

No, sir, I never received these casks.

Mr. Exham (Justice) – Did you receive the packages?

I cannot be very accurate as to the number of packages.

Mr. Murphy – What did they contain?

Stationery. It was a small parcel. The nearest place Fishbourne sent anything to me was Westport.

Cross-examined by Dr. Boyd QC (defence) – The book I produce shows nothing that was sent to me save by the Alert or Alexandria. My store book was sent to the Board of Irish Lights and I cannot get it.

Dr. Boyd – That book ought to be produced.

Mr. O'Brien (prosecution) – We have not got it.

Mr. Exham – During the entire time you were on the island – two years, you said – you only received two deliveries from Fishbourne?

That is all that I can remember. (To Dr. Boyd) The store book would show what I received from Fishbourne.

Did you not say, 'I'll not swear I did not receive other things besides those I mentioned?' I received nothing else.

Robert Redmond, keeper of the lighthouse on Eagle Island East, deposed that he received two casks through Fishbourne in July 1879. He did not receive twelve packages in July, nor did he receive any casks in July or August.

Cross-examined by Mr. Curran (defence) – His assistant made the entries in the store book in his absence.

Mr. Exham – But, when the entries were made, in July or August last year, were you present when the assistant made any entries he did make?

Yes.

On the 17th May, Justice Exham ruled that there was sufficient evidence to send the men for trial and ruled accordingly.

The trial before a jury in June basically went through all the evidence again. Messrs. O'Brien and Redmond repeated their testimony, along with many others around the coast. Here was the invoice, we received nothing. Faced with a bombardment of evidence from keepers around the country, from the workers in the stores department at Kingstown and from the clerks in the Irish Lights accountancy office, the only real defence that was put forward was that the charge was one of *conspiracy* and the prosecution had not shown that the two men had actually *conspired* with each other. Mr Tyner's defence team claimed their client was guilty of negligence rather than conspiracy.

After three days, the jury retired and after ninety minutes returned the guilty verdict, with a recommendation that Tynan should be showed mercy as there was no evidence that he had gained financially from the offence and had been a faithful servant of the Board for many years.

At the sentencing two days later, the lawyers for both the defendants produced letters from doctors saying that prison sentences would be injurious to their health. The judge said the education and upbringing of the duo aggravated the crime and the plea from the jury regarding leniency for Tynan was totally wrong – if anything, his betrayal of trust made his crime all the worse. He sentenced them both to eighteen months imprisonment with such labour as was suitable to their health, strength and age.

Both counsels asked that the judge rule out hard labour, in view of the medical certificates, and also as they were people used to desk jobs rather than manual labour. In reply, the judge said he would leave that up to the prison authorities. He didn't set much store in the medical certificates anyway, he declared.

Birds

It seems a natural assumption that Eagle Island got its name from the nesting of that beautiful but vicious bird that no longer graces the Mullet coastline. Nine-year-old Agnes Corish, in one of her letters to the *Weekly Irish Times* in August 1894, writes that *it is said that a pair of eagles used to build on it in olden times* and, whereas this may well have been an educated guess from an adult member of the lighthouse community, the name arose from somewhere.

Seán Lysaght, in his wonderful quest for ancient eagle nesting sites, chronicled in *Eagle Country*, states that *the eagles that frequented the sea cliffs and mountains of Mayo since the last glaciation, were persecuted to extinction during the nineteenth century and their genotype has been lost forever*.

That the Golden Eagle and Sea-Eagle occasionally terrorised a Mayo farmer's poultry and livestock is undeniable but they scarcely deserved the systemic poisoning and hunting that heralded their eventual extinction in the county by the First World War. None of Richard Manliffe Barrington's reports of Irish bird migrations between 1881 and 1897, made with the collaboration of Irish lightkeepers, makes any reference to eagles in the reports from Eagle Island.

Derry's newly-opened Magee College Museum acknowledged in 1867, a donation of *an eagle's claw – shot on Eagle Island, County Mayo* by Captain A. Kennedy, R.N., Derry, though whether this bird was resident or just visiting is not stated. Unfortunately, this is another case of is it Eagle or Achill Island? As Achill was a known stronghold of the bird and navy men shouldn't have been running around Ballast Board land with guns, I imagine this was not our Eagle Island.

Eagles like to build their nests on wide ledges, high on inaccessible cliffs, where they are safe from predators, though it is hard to think of a creature that would be bold or stupid enough to mess with an eyrie (except the beloved homo sapiens, of course.) The sea cliffs on the western, seaward side of the island would be ideal for the bird if it weren't for the seismic waves that crash up and over the cliffs in bad storms. If the waves could smash a lighthouse lantern on the top of the cliff, they would surely do worse damage to a nest.

That said, it was reported that white-tailed sea-eagles nesting on the island in the 1700s gave it its name. They used to spend their summers on this deserted outpost until the building of the lighthouses drove them from their ancestral home. It would be ironic indeed if the Eagle Island lighthouse was responsible for the lack of eagles on the island.

It may seem strange to us but even in the Victorian age, the migration of birds was not a concept that was widely known or understood. The sight of a flock of geese or swallows heading out westwards across the vast ocean was explained by eminent scientists as a huge death ritual. They were going to the sea to die, rather like lemmings careering over a cliff. Another theory was the birds were going to their hibernation grounds under the water

to return in spring, the problem of ‘breathing’ not being seen as a barrier to this point of view.

Though today, such theories seem laughable, the practicalities of studying ocean-bound birds were, in the Victorian era, very difficult. How do you follow a flock of barnacle geese as they rocket over Gladree to the open ocean? Before the age of Marconi and transatlantic cables, could this tiny band of aeronautical adventurers be linked to a similar troupe that arrived in Gander, Newfoundland a day or two later? Was it logical to assume that tiny birds with lungs smaller than a fingernail could make a trip 4,000 miles across the Atlantic twice a year?

Gradually, knowledge grew, mainly thanks to a group of wealthy landowners who, having no need to work for a living, devoted much of their time to cruising around Europe and studying the wildlife. Papers were published in learned journals, some adding to the general knowledge of fauna in these islands, others hotly disputed, but there was little concerted effort to solve the questions surrounding migration which, by the 1870s, had become a widely accepted theory.

In 1876, *Chamber’s Journal*, a well-respected scientific and historical magazine, published a rather interesting call-to-arms to naturalists, with a novel *modus operandum*.

It is much to be wished that some of the light-keepers of our lighthouses would make notes of their observations concerning seals, whales, birds, fishes, and other animals. Such records would be valuable; and might not some of them occupy their leisure hours in the study of Natural History? Interesting observations would then certainly be made, and new facts added to our stores of knowledge.

In 1880, the first *Report on the Migration of Birds* for the previous year was published. It contained reports from lightkeepers in Scotland, Wales and parts of England. The third *Report*, for the year 1881, included Irish lighthouses and lightvessels for the first time and continued to do so until around 1897. Aside from adding greatly to the knowledge of bird behaviour and migration, the keepers who participated in the survey were acknowledged by name, which greatly increases our knowledge of who was serving where in an era when accurate lists were not recorded.

The Ireland part of the surveys was facilitated by Richard Manliffe Barrington and Mr. A.G. More. Barrington from Fassaroe in county Wicklow was a noted ornithologist and indeed part-funded an 1896 expedition to Rockall to study the birdlife there. When the British ceased funding the bird reports in 1888, it was Barrington who stumped up the money for a further ten years.

Participation in the surveys was not mandatory although permission to take part was given with the blessing of Irish Lights. In 1881, the first year of participation, forty schedules were sent out to Irish stations, which were generally filled out to varying degrees by the keepers in spring and autumn. (Summer and winter observations were obviously not needed for a study of migration.) As the preface to the 1881 record states,

When we remember their many and various duties, and that the observations are entirely voluntary, there is reason to be well contented with the first attempt of this kind to collect information on the Irish coast; and we return our sincere thanks to all the lighthouse-keepers who have given their time and attention to the subject.

Irish Lights assisted by sending out books for identifying birds and binoculars and many keepers became very competent ornithologists as a result. They were encouraged to send

wings and legs to Barrington and, in the case of unusual species, whole birds. As a result, Barrington ended up with over 3,000 specimens which he kept in his beautifully preserved museum at Fassaroe prior to donating them to the Dead Zoo in Merrion Square, Dublin.

The instructions to the keepers were meticulous. One sample per envelope, but many small envelopes could be sent in a larger envelope. Enter the date and time, whether killed striking the lantern or not, wind speed and direction at the time etc. Also, one extremely lighthouse-specific instruction - *Soak the birds in methylated spirits if no boat comes.*

The list of birds recorded at Eagle Island is too long and exhaustive to reproduce here. I will simply detail the reports from one year – 1884 – as an example of the wealth of detail amassed and the variety of birds observed. The principal keeper at Eagle Island West did not participate that year but Daniel Hawkins of the East lighthouse correlated all his observations which, considered with the other forty or so stations, enabled Barrington and More to create a good idea of the migratory habits of many bird species.

Some evidence has been given that the Wren is resident on the Tearaght, Skelligs, and Eagle Islands, all three very bare and isolated rocks on the west coast; but the specimens received differ in no respect from the Common Wren of the mainland.

Eagle Island, East. —The grass on this island is short and stunted, and not sufficiently long to afford cover or shelter for birds. I have not seen or heard any birds strike the lantern. No night migration was observable on this island. There is not a bush or hedgerow within forty miles. — Daniel Hawkins.

- Oct. 13th, one Sparrow Hawk, at noon, hovering.
- Nov. 10th, one seen. (blackbird)
- Sept. 17th, Stonechats at 8 a.m. going S., rested: wind S.W., light; 27th, about twenty rested and left at dusk, going S.W.; wind, strong W. to S.W. Oct. 7th, Stonechats going W., rested; left at noon; misty, wind strong N.W. Nov. 3rd, about seventy going S.W.; wind light S. (See this station under head of "Linnet.")
- Oct. 1st, Wrens going S.W., rested and left at 4 p.m., wind light S.W.; 7th, Wrens going W., with Linnets, Stonechats, Sparrows, and Tomtits; wind light N.W. Nov. 3rd, Wrens going S.W., wind S., light; 14th, I enclose a Wren found in lantern last night. [Received. —R. M. B.]
- Oct. 7th, Tomtits, 10 a.m., going W., with Wrens, Linnets, &c.;
- Sept. 15th, two Wagtails all day flying about, wind E., light; 27th, two ditto.
- Nov. 30th, five or six Snow Buntings. Remained on island up to the present date, Jan. 1st, 1885.
- Sept. 17th, some Sparrows going S.; wind S.W. Rested. Oct. 1st, 10 a.m., some Sparrows going S.W.; wind S.W., light. Rest and left at 4 p.m. Oct. 7th, several Sparrows going W. Left at noon.
- Sept. 12th, about twenty Grey Linnets going W., wind S.W., light, rested some time on island; 17th, about one hundred going S. at 8 a.m., wind S.W., light, rested a little while; 18th, two all day, remained until Oct. 1st. Oct. 1st, about two hundred going S.W., wind light, S.W., rested a while; 7th, "about one thousand Linnets, Stonechats, Sparrows, Wrens, and Tomtits" at 10 a.m., going W., wind W.N.W., light, misty, left at noon; 13th, two all day. Nov. 3rd, seventy "Stonechats, Linnets, and Wrens" going S.W.; wind light, S.

- Oct. 31st, about one thousand (starlings) going W. 8 a.m.; rested; wind light S.W., Nov. 3rd, about one thousand rested on island going S.W.; wind light S.; 5th to 13th, continuous flights of Starlings going W. and S.W.; the wind W. to N.W. The Starling has visited us in large numbers this month. This is strange, as they have not shown much since 1880-81.

- Nov. 14th, thirty "black Crows" 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., flew inland.

- Nov. 20th, about eighty Barnacles going N.E.; wind strong, N.W. I only saw one flock this autumn. At Killybegs I very frequently saw flocks of Wild Geese passing overhead in autumn. Perhaps this island is out of their track, being more to west.

- Oct. 20th, about two hundred "Puffins," -going S.W.; wind light W. This was the only flock seen in autumn.

- Oct. 20th, two (cormorants), all day fishing around island.

- Sept. 19th, about twenty (gannets), all day; 23rd, ditto; 27th, forty. Oct. 2nd, one hundred; 12th, two hundred; 20th, fifty going S.W.

- Sept. 11th, two to three hundred Gulls (Grey and Kittiwake) all day after fish. Nov. 3rd, two Grey Gulls. Very few Gulls this autumn.

- Dec. 15th, two seen. (thrushes)

Although these journals were published annually until 1888, the Barrington-funded, Ireland-only reports were published together in one large volume in 1900. Some of the conclusions were remarkable – there was, for example, a close correlation between the number of birds killed striking the lantern and a moonless night. Also, non-native birds were much more likely to be killed 'striking' than native birds, and both preferred this method of self-destruction in autumn rather than spring!

Barrington continued to collect bird records from lighthouses until his death in 1915, publishing his findings in *The Irish Naturalist*. Thus, in January of that year, he found time to record that one of the keepers on the Tearaght had told him that in February 1909 he had seen nine waxwings during his time on Eagle Island. A report in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy 1911-15* states that Barrington once received a hoopoe, shot on Eagle Island on 12th April 1867. Unlike the golden eagle story above, this may well have been our Eagle Island rather than Achill, as lightkeepers seemed to regard the shooting of birds as sport, as well as a means to supplementing their diets.

The employment of lightkeepers as unpaid bird-spotters seems to have recommenced in the 1920s. In October of 1928, Jack Lavelle reported large flocks of guillemots and razorbills heading W.S.W. and S.S.W. He also noted a female hen harrier and a peregrine falcon on different occasions.

The following year, large flocks of lapwings were observed in January and March heading south-west and west respectively. Not quite in the same category, but in 1935, four Irish racing pigeons landed on the Fleetwood steam trawler *Ethel King* as she fished off Eagle Island. Evidently lost, the crew took them back to their home port when the fishing was completed. They were released off Rathlin Island on the trawler's next trip to Irish waters.

In March 1943, keepers McMahon and Trant noticed a great skua on the rocks, which allowed them to approach within ten yards. The following day it was on the rock again and equally as tame. *The white markings on the wings were closely visible to both of us*, wrote John Trant. It was only the second appearance off the Mayo coast of this bird which is

rarely seen in spring. A black redstart was killed 'striking' on the 4th November 1943. It was only the third such bird recorded in county Mayo and Eagle Island was the most northerly station to see one. Two years to the day later, the same keeper, P. McMahon recorded another one. The following year, he noted a house martin killed striking on the 6th April.

Only the fourth specimen of a chiffchaff from the west coast was forwarded by keeper H. Duggan on 29th March 1949. The weather was gloomy with a light easterly breeze, the same conditions in which the second specimen had been killed striking on the same date in 1946. The third specimen had killed itself at the lantern on 31st March 1947. Not a great month for chiffchaffs. A very rare visitor to Ireland, a Greenland Redpoll, was killed striking the lantern on the 20th May 1955. Even more unusual was that every other sighting of this bird had occurred between September and November.

In 1956, a mass migration of meadow pipits, probably from Iceland, was observed at Inishtrahull, Rathlin O'Beirne and Eagle Island in the first week of September. These flocks were all streaming southwards on their three-week journey to Spain and beyond.

A report produced for the Corrib gas field proposal mentioned that Eagle Island was home to breeding colonies of common gull (twelve pairs in 1969) and herring gull.

A rather unusual occurrence took place in 1981 when the *SS River Moy*, on a journey from Ostend to Ballina, was passing Eagle Island in a thick fog. Suddenly, from out of the grey, a small flock of meadow pipits appeared and proceeded to alight on the ship, on the deck, on the roofs of the bridge and cabins, even inside. One poor bird that later died smashed its beak when landing. All were exhausted and when picked up and placed in the palm of a hand, made no attempt to escape. This took place on the last day of August and it was assumed that this was an early flock migrating to water climes that had become lost and disorientated in the fog.

And, lastly, where would the keepers have been without the humble chicken? Most keepers, along with most households in rural Ireland, had a few of these birds bobbing around getting under everybody's feet. And when, occasionally, giant waves swept them down into the ocean, the eggs of local seagulls provided a satisfactory, if slightly harder-gotten, substitute.

Visiting in August 2020, Sean Doyle said that he spotted two raptors on the island but could not determine the species. Hopefully not velociraptors. Maybe the hen harrier or the peregrine falcon that Lavelle spotted in 1928 were back. It is entirely possible that, with the departure of the keepers in 1988, many birds, that may not have visited the island during its 153 years of human habitation, may have already returned.

Seán Lysaght makes the point that, in the case of eagles, at least, they often return to the sites of old nests, probably because they were good spots that their ancestors selected. And with eagles recently introduced to the west of Ireland, who is to say that the great fan-shaped silhouette might not one day be seen in the skies over Eagle Island?

The 1890s

“a fight with the sea, in its angry roar, shames all the strife on land”

Stormy Seas

The iron barque *Nairnshire* which left the Clyde on the 12th September, was spotted off Eagle Island with her rudder-head gone. She was bound for Brisbane with a general cargo. She refused all assistance but asked that her situation be reported – *Greenock Telegraph and Clyde Shipping Gazette*, Saturday 20th September 1890

The *Donald Ferguson*, sailing from Quebec with deals, was abandoned off Eagle Island. The crew safely reached Broadhaven – *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, Wednesday 21st September 1892 (the vessel was later towed to Killybegs)

Captain Holten, the mate and three seamen arrived on Saturday evening in an inlet off Dunaff Head, Inishowen, in a pitiable state of exhaustion. Their ship, the *Ocean Witch*, with a cargo of manure, foundered off Eagle Island. Being bound to Limerick from Plymouth, they were already way off course. When the time came to abandon ship, they found that the first boat had been stove in, so they were in every sense in the manure. A mad scramble ensued to provision and launch a smaller boat – the launching was successful, but the provisioning wasn't, as they only had a few biscuits and no water. One of the crew became quite deranged from thirst. They rigged a sail with a bed quilt and after four days they finally made it to Inishowen, where they were well-cared for by the community – *Dublin Evening Telegraph*, Monday 30th April 1894

Bound for Limerick from Troon in Scotland, the steamer *Bordeaux* put into Killybegs after losing boats and sails while off Eagle Island. She later arrived safely in Limerick with her cargo of coal – *Glasgow Herald*, Thursday 27th December 1894

The Dartmouth schooner *Proba*, bound from Plymouth to Sligo with another cargo of manure, put into Blackrock Bay (Blacksod Bay?) for shelter after her jibboom was carried away when passing Eagle Island lighthouse. At the same time, the mate was washed overboard and was only rescued with great difficulty – *Freemans Journal*, Thursday 23rd March 1899

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
John Lavelle W	1894-1900		Michael Callaghan W	1894
Joseph Corish E	1892-95		Thomas F Ryan E	1894-99
			Benjamin Jeffers	1899
			Michael Boyle	1899-1901

The census of 5th April 1891 showed a joint record high (with 1861) of 22 people sharing the four houses on the fourteen-acre rock. Most of these were probably children of the keepers and it must have livened up the place to have so many youngsters around.

Principal lightkeeper at the East lighthouse was **Joseph Corish (94)**, born in 1859, son of Peter Corish, also a lightkeeper. Joseph himself had been born on Oyster Island, home to two lighthouses in the nineteenth century. One of the victims of the terrible Tuskar Rock tragedy in 1812, in which fourteen labourers died, was a Josiah Corish and it is said that the Corish lightkeeping dynasty started with him. Descendants of the victims, it is said, were given preferential treatment in lightkeeping applications.

With him was his wife Elizabeth Mary Doran, commonly called Lizzie, (or 'Poor Mrs. Corish' in the storm letters) Her father had been a gunner. Her aunt, Mrs. Doran, was also in attendance and was evidently quite elderly.

The Corish children included Eddie (12), Mary Josephine ("Josie") (11), Agnes Gertrude (9), Frank (8), Catherine A. ("Katie") (5), John Joseph (3) and Louis (2). The first three children had been born on Rathlin Island; Katie and John in Donegal; and Louis was the local lad, which dates the Corish arrival on the lighthouse back to at least 1892. Another child, Elizabeth, was born and died on the island in 1894, almost certainly the last person to do either.

After Eagle, it seems the Corishes moved down to Blacksod where Joseph served on Blackrock and, by 1901, he was in Ballycotton. 'Poor Mrs. Corish' died in Donaghadee in 1924 and Joseph survived her by fourteen years.

The assistant keeper at the East lighthouse was 21-year-old **Tom Ryan (111)** also, as is evident from the letters, the son of a lightkeeper. Tom had been born on Dursey Sound, the mainland dwellings for the ill-fated Calf Rock lighthouse, where his father Francis had been stationed. His mother was Mary Anne Redmond, another famous lightkeeping name, whose grandfather had served on Skellig Michael and then famously on the Maidens, where he was father of the female part of the Maidens Lovers tale.

Tom had joined the service on the 1st August 1894 and so was new to the job, though he had probably been doing it all his life. After braving the wilds of Duncannon North for two whole months, Eagle Island beckoned. He became a principal keeper in 1908.

Married men on light stations around the coast naturally had their wives in tow to cook and help perform domestic chores. Single men, like Tom, frequently brought a sister to the party who frequently ended up marrying a lightkeeper based at the same station. (On single-keeper lighthouses, the wife or sister was officially the assistant keeper and received a salary for this.) In the Ryan case, the mother (and one daughter, Kate) stayed with the father at the Fastnet (Crookhaven being the shore station), while two of Tom's sisters accompanied him to Eagle Island.

Mary Elizabeth Ryan, known as Lizzie, at 23 years old, was the eldest of the Ryan children. She had been born in Mornington, county Meath, where Francis had been the keeper of the pile lighthouses on the Boyne estuary.

The younger sister at Eagle Island, Mary Margaret (19), was known as Polly. She had been born at Duncannon in county Wexford, though her birth certificate does not state if her father was stationed at Duncannon or the Hook. Polly wrote to her sister, Kate, while Lizzie wrote to her mother.

Tom stayed on Eagle for a month shy of six years, leaving for St. John's Point, county Down in September 1900. During this time, he married Catherine Galvin from Kinsale and presumably brought her up to the Mullet. A daughter, Mary, was born in Corclough in 1896, the informant being Polly Ryan. Another daughter, Catherine – Kathleen - was born in 1899.

After Eagle, they moved to St. Johns Point, county Down, Roancarrig, Rathlin O'Beirne and many more, amassing children as well as stations. One son in particular, Francis J. Ryan, born on Rathlin, would become a well-known keeper. Tom retired in 1933 from Drogheda North and died in Kinsale in 1955.

Up above at the West lighthouse, relatively unscathed during the great storm and completely unaware of the drama unfolding a few hundred yards away, was **John Lavelle (31)**, his wife Kate (nee Manning) and their two sons Peter (20) and Bill (23), both of whom would later become lightkeepers. There may of course have been other children not mentioned in despatches.

Kate Lavelle was a local girl, child of a Belmullet farmer, and John was probably the same, as he was listed as a Corclough farmer on his marriage cert. He joined Irish Lights in 1870. He was still listed on Eagle as PK in 1900. The 1901 census shows him as an ex-keeper, lodging in Belmullet with a local publican / merchant, John Lenehan, a widower.

Which leaves us with 'The Callaghans' or rather Mrs. Kate Callaghan, in whose house the majority of the rescuees were housed, which in itself, suggests it was a smaller family unit than the Lavelles. There were two William Callaghans, father and son, who both had large families in the nineteenth century but both Williams had died by the time of the storm.

The younger William had died in May 1894 at Inishowen, after which the remainder of the family (they had buried eight children by the time the father died) would have had to have vacated the premises. One of the sons, also William, became a lightkeeper and commenced his travels around the country with his sister. The other, Michael J., also became a lightkeeper and likewise travelled the country with his mother, Kate, and sister Margaret.

I cannot say for certain but I strongly suspect that Kate Callaghan, then aged 50, was the Mrs Callaghan of the West lighthouse, keeping house with her daughter Margaret (24) for her newly appointed son **Michael Callaghan (94)** aged 22. Michael would naturally have been the assistant keeper to John Lavelle, the principal keeper.

Michael had been born at Tarbert in 1872, where his father had been transferred after burying Michael's two older brothers on Skellig Michael. He never married, dying of tuberculosis in the asylum in Portrane in 1908, while serving as assistant keeper at Rockabill, leaving another child for Mrs. Callaghan to bury.

The surname Jeffers is, in lighthouse circles, synonymous with the island of Inishgort in Clew Bay but **Benjamin Robert Jeffers (71)** is not one of them, directly at least. His father, a coastguard, had been born in Sussex in England, though his grandfather had been Irish. Both appear to have been in the coastguard service and Benjamin had been born at Kilrush in 1866. He joined Irish Lights in September 1885.

We do not know when he rocked up to Eagle Island as an assistant keeper but we know that he was there as an AK in 1899 and we also know he was transferred on promotion to Inishtrahull on 1st August that year. He was a member of the Open Brethren church and was accompanied by his older sister Sarah wherever he was stationed.



He later received a commendation from the RNLI for helping to rescue the crew of a ship that had been washed up near Straw Island in Galway Bay in 1911. The feat made headlines far and wide for Benjamin's two dogs saved some men by pulling them out of the raging sea and onto the beach.

At the age of 50, he got married to Charlotte Bradshaw and they had one child, Rebekah. Poor Sarah, who had kept house for him for thirty years was evidently relieved of her duties. Benjamin died in Belfast in 1941.

Benjamin Robert Jeffers c. 1912

The 1890s

Agnes and Josie Corish were members of the *League of Kindness*, run by a character called Kincora in the *Weekly Irish Times*. The League was for children under 14 years of age and basically printed interesting letters from the children, who had to supply subscriptions for other children they had inveigled into the group. In reply, Kincora frequently made comments like *you need to work on your grammar or take care with your spelling*. There were regular essay competitions, after which Kincora would tear the entries to shreds. Once he didn't award a second prize because, he said, the essays were not of the requisite quality.

On 20th July 1894, Josie, the elder girl, bemoaned the lack of other children on the island and appears to be suffering from rock fever. *It is hard to find anything to write about on a rock on the bleak west coast*, she wrote, *seeing no one only the boatmen who attend twice a week, which they usually do in summer, but in winter as many times in the month is thought good*.

She added that *there are a few funny young gentlemen on the island at present. I will tell you some of their tricks next time*. This would evidently be a reference to Bill (23) and Peter (20) Lavelle, sons of the principal keeper, John Lavelle, and 21-year-old assistant keeper, Michael Callaghan. Sadly, Josie neglected to share their doubtless hilarious antics, or perhaps Kincora did not deign to print the letter due to grammatical inaccuracies.

Agnes, writing at the same time, responded to another League member, Isabelle Moynihan, who had gently chided her for not writing much. *I am sure she would find everything strange and wonderful if she could spend a week on Eagle Island and a week would be long enough on a place only fit for the wild sea birds*, she declared, obviously yearning for the bright lights of St. John's Point, Donegal, their previous posting. She also mentioned her three-year-old brother John who had his sailor suit on for the first time and *looks quite the man*.

Josie hammers home the point about the boredom in an October 7th letter that actually won *Prize Letter of the Week*. *I would write every week, if possible, but for want of some news that would interest you; but no, I have none in this backward place*. She then gives some family information. *My youngest brother has hair like flax; he is a lovely little fellow; he will be two years old the 16th of this month. I had another sister that died, a lovely little baby, early in the year*.

This must have been Eliza Mary Corish whose baptism was recorded at Kilmore RC church but whose birth and death records cannot be located. She was probably buried in a section of the walled garden on the island, a small stone to mark the final resting place of the last child to be born there.

On the same day – October 7th – Agnes wrote that the weather was more like summer than October. *We enjoy ourselves very much out on the grass with our brothers and sisters, playing ball and cricket and amusing ourselves every way we can*, she wrote, *and in the evening, after our lessons are said, we play chess, as dada taught us how to play it, and my little brother is a great hand at it. We also have a dance now and again, as we have two fiddles and one melodeon. We have five chickens and a goat; there are five sheep on the island also*.

The reference to cricket may seem incongruous but the so-called 'garrison sports' – soccer, rugby and cricket – were widely played in Ireland in the nineteenth century and cricket dates back to the 1700s.

It also seems that education was well-structured and not *ad hoc*. This was usually the preserve of the mother of the house, depending of course on her own education, but the small classes, and therefore individual attention, meant that when rock island children eventually landed back on the mainland, they not only held their own with their mainland peers but in fact frequently surpassed them.

The five sheep on the island was well short of the "two or three dozen" envisaged by George Halpin when the towers were erected. Maybe there was not a need for so many. The way that Agnes phrases it, it appears that the five chickens and the goat were belonging to the Corish family, while the five sheep were communal.

Dear Kincora, Since I wrote last we had the first of our winter storms, wrote Agnes in December. *It was a long one, lasting nearly a month and all that time we had no word from the mainland; so we were delighted when we saw the boat coming out this day week and a new neighbour for us in her, so that we will not be lonely now. The weather here for the past week has been lovely, more like spring than winter*.

It is probable that 'the new neighbour' was one of the Ryan sisters, either Polly or Lizzie. According to Tom Ryan's service record, he was promoted to assistant keeper on 1st October 1894 and it is likely that he arrived with one of his sisters around that date. It

appears likely that the second sister arrived after the four-week winter storm of November.

On the 11th September 1894, there was a very sad drowning case in nearby Broadhaven. Patrick Barrett, a local man, was out fishing with several other men in a small boat. The boat, it was said, was insufficiently manned as there were no nets. Applications had been made to the Congested Districts Board for nets but they were looking for 1s 3d for each net, a sum none of the men could afford. Patrick Barrett borrowed a net but only on the condition that he turn over a portion of the catch to the owner.

While they were out, a sudden storm sprang up. There was no pier of refuge outside the infamous Rosspoint Bar, a shallow and dangerous stretch of sand that had caused many deaths in the past. Insufficiently crewed, the boat capsized trying to negotiate the bar. Fortunately, another boat came to their rescue but Patrick was swept away and lost.

He left a widow and six children under nine years of age, one of whom was unborn, all destined for the workhouse unless funds could be raised. An appeal was set up. Mrs. Corish of Eagle Island lighthouse donated two shillings to the fund, as did the Eagle Island boat contractor, Anthony Gallagher, despite being in straitened financial circumstances himself at the time.

Sir Robert Ball, the Astronomer Royal for Ireland, who took a photographic record of the Commissioners' inspections in the 1890s and 1900s, was also much in demand as a public speaker in both Ireland and Britain. At one of these widely reported events, he said that *one of the roughest and wildest places on the whole Irish coast was Eagle Island in the West. The sea at times washed over the lighthouse on the very top and the lighthouse keeper, in order to save his children, was often obliged, in stormy weather, to perch them on high shelves (Laughter).* This would doubtlessly have been pre-1895.

The latter end of 1894 appears to have been a time of terrible storms. Both Josie and Agnes Corish wrote in their letters to Kincora of the first of the winter storms arriving.

It was a long one lasting almost a month and all that time we had no word from the mainland, said Agnes.

We were nearly the whole month of November without a boat, wrote Josie.

Polly Ryan wrote to her mother that she had already told her about the *gale of Friday last*, which was presumably 21st December. The *Freeman's Journal* the following Monday described it as the largest storm to hit Dublin in ten years. In many ways, this storm was actually worse than the one that was to strike the west coast of Ireland one week later as the scale of damage on land and on sea was much greater.

But for Eagle Island East lighthouse, the 21st December gale was only the curtain raiser.

The Storm of 29th December 1894

The storm in the early morning of Saturday 29th December is of course etched in permanent ink in the annals of Irish lighthouse history, rivalling the Big Wind of 1839 for sheer power and destruction. From the English Channel to the North Sea and from the Irish Sea to the Atlantic seaboard came reports of death and widespread damage to property.

Twenty-six crew members of the iron-built *Osseo* were killed when the ship foundered at the entrance to Holyhead harbour in Wales, either hit by falling masts or washed

overboard. A schooner was wrecked off Troon in Scotland, the crew being landed by line. Another schooner was dismasted off Cromer, the crew flinging themselves into the sea and being hauled to safety.

In Ireland, the fishing fleet at Arranmore Island in county Donegal was put out of action by the severity of the gale. The iron barque *Helene* went aground on Scatterry Island in the Shannon. A schooner ran aground at Liscannor, wreckage was sighted at Fenit and Smerwick. Roofs of houses, factories and workhouses were ripped off and trees were tossed around like kindling.

On Eagle Island, one of the first places to bear the brunt, as the gale of Friday night turned into the raging storm of early Saturday morning, the inhabitants of the two stations battened down the hatches and prayed to God. It was generally assumed that if any damage should occur, it would be to the West tower which was first in line of the storm. In previous storms, it was usually the West tower that came off worst. However, with the wind blowing from a W.N.W. direction, the East lighthouse was similarly exposed to the elements and, being at a lower level than their western neighbours, found itself in the direct line of the maritime attack.

Through the letters of Polly and Lizzie Ryan, which are reproduced in full below, it is possible to piece together most of the experiences of the island's inhabitants that wild and fearful night.

At the East Tower, the dwellings of which were practically destroyed, there were the families of Corish and Ryan.

The best way to describe the drama of the night at the East lighthouse is to quote the letters of the people who were there at the time, writing just a couple of days afterwards. First up is Polly Ryan: -

*Eagle Island East, Belmullet
January 1st 1895*

My dear Kate,

I trust you may all spend a joyous New Year and that you are all well. I hope that Father is safe on the rock. I trust in God that nothing is wrong, as God help us poor sinners. If you knew how we put in the time, you would feel for us. I told you of the gale on Friday last so I need not mention it. But Friday 29th beats all. What would you think at half past two to jump out of bed and into water?

Well, it was blowing a terrible gale all night but we never expected anything like what occurred. The Green Seas were going over our houses as fast as if we were on the Alderman. You can imagine when we got up to see the door broken down, and the rooms all filled with the sea. Lord, how we were, the roof being stripped of every slate and the sea raging outside, the Lantern was out.

Tom ran to Mr. Corish, leaving Lizzie and I to dress ourselves, and they ran between sea, slates and all sorts. They got up and saw a pane broken in the lantern, they put in a blind pane by a hard struggle, the gale raging to its height at the time. When they came down, they came in to us and we in a mad state with fright. My God, how we were I never can tell.

However, we thought it best to be all together as window frames, roof and all the house were going to pieces. We went in to Mrs. Corish and we were all in a state waiting every moment to see what might turn up. The slates were being lifted off like flies. The youngsters

were all brought downstairs, as the sea was coming down on their beds, and lucky they were, for had they remained there, killed they would have been.

All of us were sitting in Mrs. Corish's room when the sea ran over the house smashing the door in the hall, filling the rooms where we had been sitting. You never saw such a sight. There we were next to mad men, while Tom and Mr. Corish barred the door and swept the sea out.

Well, what can I say except we were waiting for our last moment, and poor Mrs. Corish in a state and no wonder, fearful for her little ones, but they were good little dears. I, for my part, had good courage and as we were saying beforehand, never surrender, but alas, when I said that on the surface without the care of anyone but God alone to save us, I broke down. Tom gave us a telling off, told us to trust more than that in ourselves. So we tried to brave it, as pen nor paper could ever tell of our escape.

Well, as our house was said to be the best, we thought it might be better to get in if a chance offered, as the fire was put (out?) where we were sitting, by the sea coming down the chimney – a nice sight.

Dear Kate, I can never explain to you how we got on. However, you can picture us in a state like that. We had not long been in our Ship when in came the door, running into the room where we sat. Well, to try and get ourselves saved was to try and do our best. Poor Mr. Corish, the likes of him I never saw. He deserves more praise than I can ever give him. Mrs. Corish was brave until, after a bit, the poor woman she was very much shocked. As any woman would be to see her little family there. We were praying for the Lord to lessen the gale, but no sign of it getting any better. We were in an awful state all night trying to bar the sea out.

Well, Mr. Corish's place got all broken down, upstairs got knocked into one. The windows all broken in, the staircase carried away, I can't tell you, Lizzie, I dare say Tom will give you particulars correct. God alone knows how we were saved.

The lights were put out several times, all the panes in the Tower window were put in. They went to have a look and the paint and oil stores were levelled to the ground, pantries and everything smashed. Flags were torn up and tossed around like marbles. Nobody would realise it only us that had seen it.

Our suffering was terrible. My Lord to see the sea breaking over us tearing all away and no chance of escape, we all expected to be in the other World before now. Tom and Mr. Corish would try and be gay, but only deceiving was in their hearts. They thought, as they told us since, that carried away we would be in the morning.

The men from the Upper Station came down between the sprays, and we were saying they were likely carried away as their station is said to be the most exposed, but they had not suffered much. Of course, all the outhouses were wrecked. They came and took us one by one to their station, to Mrs. Callaghan and Lavelles and we were thankful to God to reach them. All things were destroyed on Mrs. Corish. My God, such a wreck you have never seen. They took all things of any account to this station where we all remain awaiting orders. Flags were put up yesterday, and the boat came today. It's gone since with Telegrams to the Office for fresh water and salt.

Lizzie, Tom and I, Mr. and Mrs. Corish and some of the youngsters are in Mrs. Callaghan's. Mrs. Doran, Mrs. Corish's aunt, and a few youngsters were in Mrs. Lavelle's. Such a state you have never seen any place in. Everywhere levelled, but we were thankful to God for our

escape. Our good neighbours deserve credit for the attention, I must say. So long, trusting in God dear Father is all right, as the likes of the gale we have never seen. Mother is well I hope. Write soon. I will write again when the boat will be out.

You little think how we are today, the Lower Station is a complete wreck.

Good luck, Polly

PS You will excuse this as the men must get dinner. They are going mad, running joyously at our escape. Lizzy will tell you all,

Lizzie was no less eloquent than Polly:

*Eagle Island West, Tarmoncarrow
January 1st 1895*

My Dear Mother,

I wish you all a joyous New Year. Now Mother dear I hope in God you are all alive. Well, the Fastnet Creation, I mean, in particular, as if it stood last Saturday night, it will stand forever. I am dreading bad news. Now Mother dear, you will see by letter enclosed to Kate of the great storm of Friday night the 21st and what we suffered that night, that was only a mith (sic) to what we experienced on last Friday night and Saturday night the 29th Ultimo.

It was blowing hard all Friday night, we went to bed at eleven that night. Polly and I never closed an eye with terror. Well, at 2.30am an awful sea struck the roof, bashing in the roof and hall door. The first sea was dreadful. I jumped out of bed screaming "Oh God, the house is carried away!" I met Tom in the hall, trying to shut the back door. We were knee deep in the sea at the time. What do you think of that, Mother, out of my warm bed? Tom ran out to see if the lights were all right – they were blacked out. He then ran to Mr. Corish's house where we found all hands there in terror. Mr. Corish and Tom then went to the lantern and found the lantern glass broken. They put up storm panes and lit the lights.

The storm by this time was increasing every moment. Tom and Mr. C came in to us where they found Polly and me nearly dead with fright. They took us then into Mrs. Corish's house, watching our chance between each sea. Oh God, such a night! Mr. Corish went upstairs and got his little children and the poor old Auntie out of bed. We were all in Mrs. Corish's bedroom. We lit a fire and were there seated round it when Mr. Corish's back door was burst in, filling the whole house. Oh Mother, to see us then drenched! Tom and Mr. Corish got the back door shut again and at six o'clock, another dreadful sea burst the door and stair room window and kitchen, not leaving a sash shutter on one of them – then we almost died! Polly commenced to cry and my God, she turned as black as coal. Poor Mrs, Corish, there she was trying to console us by saying there was no reason to fear and herself, poor woman, almost distracted.

All our stomachs turned with fright. We deemed it wise to abandon that room and fly with our lives between each sea to our parlour. Every one of us had to take a poor little infant in our arms.

We got safely to our house (the two houses are built together.) We were no sooner in our house when the back door was drove in again and the house filled. The whole roof was gone by this time and to see the sea boiling around stairs and into all the rooms and it something frightfully.

They stayed the door again – no sooner done than in it burst again. Mrs. Doran, Eddie Corish and Polly were in the parlour door, each with a broom sweeping out the sea to keep the creature from being perished and I in the hall, sweeping it out the door as hard as I

could and poor Mr. Corish at this time trying to put planks against our doors, where, oh God, another sea burst it in, knocking them down. You can imagine us then!

Mr. Corish ran to his house to see if it would be safe for us to go back to it and there we went. In there, his back door was broken to bits, the whole roof of his house gone, the end window put right in and all the roof, the walls, the partitions broken down and the iron bedsteads broken into bits. Oh Mother, if the poor babies had been in bed, then they were smashed to bits. Our house was stove in five times and filled. We were up to our knees for five hours in water and not a splink of fire. Poor Mr. Corish and Tom telling us there was no danger and, as they told us since, they never expected to eat another bit of the Lord's bread.

Oh Mother, wasn't it terrible? There we were for five hours waiting for death, either to be killed by the roof falling down on us or to be drowned and no way of escaping. The whole wall in front of our house washed away; the paint store and oil store were levelled to the ground, blocking up the passage to the lighthouse, so we had no way of saving our lives and even if that had not been the case, we would have been washed away if we put our heads outside the door. All the flags are rooted out of the yards and the yards at the back of our houses are completely washed away. Oh, such a sight no human eye beheld.

We were resigned to our fate all the time and put my trust in the mother of God. To see all the children praying, it would rend the heart of a stone. The eldest of them, Eddie, only twelve years old and the poor old woman helpless with fright. We were certain that (the other) station was completely gone, as none of them came down till o'clock. They were asleep all the night and never knew of the great struggle for life we had.

Mr. Lavelle said he heard awful seas over his house but did not mind it much, as the sea always washes over those houses. But to think that our houses had been wrecked as they were – he undreamt it. He was turning out the light when he turned round and saw our station. He ran down and told us since he was afraid to go in as he was certain we were all dead. He then called Peter and Bill. It was then nine and the storm was beginning to lessen a bit.

Then came our time to escape. It was blowing terrific. The men had to take us all up separately. While Polly, Mrs. Corish and I were going up, we were struck by a sea and had to lie down under it. Oh thanks be to God and his Blessed Mother for we can never thank them enough.

Then all that day, the men were carrying up the beds and things in waterproof bags and other things as well. Well Mother, to see poor Mr. Corish and Tom, they were fair exhausted. We are very comfortable here, some of us in each house, and indeed the kindness of them I cannot find words to express.

We had signals flying all day yesterday for water. We had not a drop of fresh water since Saturday, nothing but salt. And to hear the poor children crying for a drink, it would make you miserable. The boat has just come out this morning. I'm glad to see by your letter that you are all well but your letters are all old ones, nothing of this storm. I trust in God that the Fastnet has not suffered – the likes of this storm has not come for hundreds of years. Anthony tells us there is a terrible lot of damage done on shore.

Anthony is gone ashore to wire the office to know what is to be done with us. I expect all the women and children will be sent ashore for lodgings. Isn't it terrible? We will be at the very least four months now homeless, perhaps more, and we just settled nice and comfortable. But we will not say a word as God and his blessed Mother saved us.

I must wind up as I could write a book on all that happened. In fact, no words could express what happened to this place. Oh Mother, I never expected to see one of you again. At first we were fair distracted but poor Mr. Doran told us to try and resign ourselves to our fate. We did then but the poor children were terrible. Good Bye, dear Mother and pray for our safety. Thank the Mother of God for protecting us.

*I'm in a hurry,
With Love to you All,
Your Fond Daughter, Lizzie*

I forgot to say the lantern glass was again broken in sometime in the morning and all lights put out but they were left so, as the men could not get near them. Imagine! This sea was being over – it was hard for our house to stand.

We will write further details later on.

It is often repeated in accounts of this night that, during the storm, the East tower dwellings were destroyed and the families there sought refuge in the tower. It should be pointed out that at no time in either Polly's or Lizzie's letter do they write about going into the tower. In fact, it is specifically mentioned that, the outhouses and sheds being flattened, their path to the tower was blocked and they couldn't have taken refuge in there if they had tried.

Another occupant of the East station, nine-year-old Josie Corish, was also a letter writer, though not quite so prolific as the Ryan girls.

However, the first Corish to have his letter printed after the storm was PK Joseph Corish, who should surely have been disqualified on age grounds alone: -

Saturday 12th January 1895 - Eagle Island, Belmullet, county Mayo

Cards from Josie and Agnes Corish with subscription on Josie's card of 2s 6d. Will write themselves shortly, when recovered from effects of late storm.

J.M. Corish

Josie eventually found the wherewithal to put pen to paper, her letter appearing in the 2nd February edition of the paper: -

Corclough January 19th 1895

Dear Kincora – It is now some time since you heard from me. We had a dreadful storm on Eagle Island on the morning of the 29th December. It was my eldest brother's birthday, so he, as well as all of us, will not soon forget it. It was something dreadful. It left us houseless. We (that is, the women and children) are ashore since the 5th January. Dear Kincora, I would like to be able to tell you all about the storm that night, but it would be impossible. None of us ever expected to see the morning; we spent such a night of terror. Unless you saw the state of the houses and the outside premises, you would not believe it. The men think it was a tidal wave: it was not one, but several of them. And the large storm wall that stood so many storms is cracked down near the large lighthouse. Dear Kincora, I will conclude, hoping you and all the members of the League enjoyed your holidays. I remain, your little friend – Josie Corish

For the East lighthouse on Eagle Island, it was the beginning of the end.

The aftermath

... a sea-crag with a crown of white buildings and a lighthouse. – Thomas J. Westropp (1912)



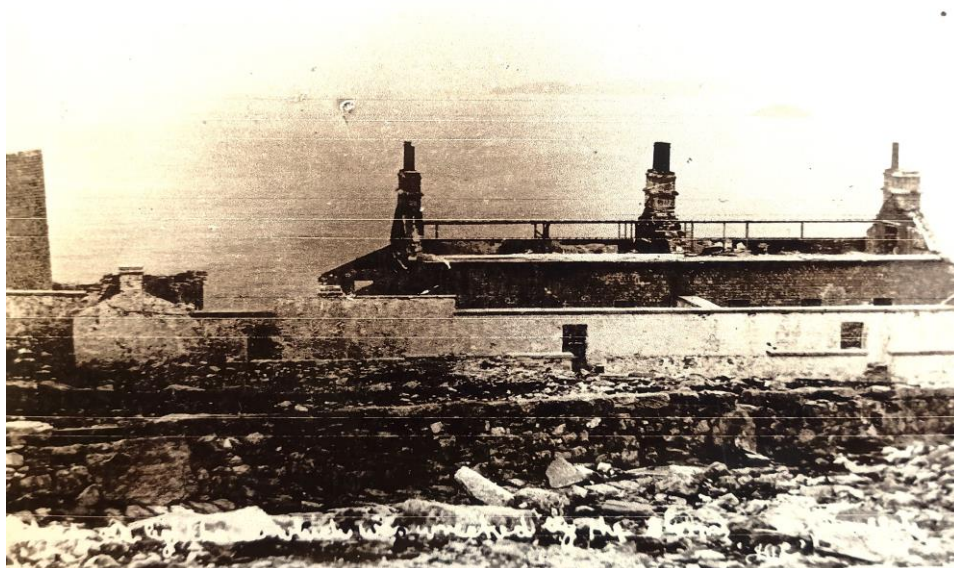
The slope below the East tower, showing the drainage holes that allowed the green seas to escape back off the island. Today, Josie Corish's sea pinks jostle for position on the steepening slope with stones and rocks flung from the tower and its protective wall (photo by Chris McDaid 2023)

As we saw from the letters, the accommodation at the lower East tower, was completely destroyed during the storm. According to Agnes Corish's letter, the women and children were evacuated on the 5th January 1895. The letter, dated 12th January, is dated as being written from Corclough, although the four purpose-built houses, designed by William Douglass, were not ready for moving into until after the turn of the century.

Agnes' letter does not specifically state whether all the women and children were removed from the island, or merely those from the stricken east station. It would have been easier to find emergency accommodation on land for two families rather than four. However, if the west station families did actually remain on the island, they were evacuated shortly thereafter.

Admiral of the Fleet, the Right Hon. S.E. Seymour in his 1912 autobiography, *My Naval Career and Travels* wrote: *I landed once on Eagle Island off Blacksod Bay on the West Coast of Ireland, and saw an astonishing proof of what the sea can do. In December 1894, during a violent westerly gale, the sea dashed up a cliff 180 feet above the sea and over the summit of the cliff with such force as to destroy some of the houses.* This he said, demonstrated that *a fight with the sea, in its angry roar, shames all the strife on land.*

William Douglass, Irish Lights chief engineer, arrived on Eagle Island shortly afterwards and surveyed the result of the storm. Aside from the irreparable damage to the dwellings at the East light and the front wall and outhouses, the storm wall, three feet thick and twenty feet high was ruptured in several places, with a large crack near the East tower. Worst of all, the tower itself was severely compromised, the lantern glass smashed and all the panes of glass broken, with plenty of water damage inside the tower.



Two curious photos (courtesy Frank Pelly) purporting to show the wreckage immediately after the storm on Eagle Island. Note the lack of roofing on the two dwellings. But also note the truncated East tower, which wasn't cut down until many months later.

The terror experienced by the families on Eagle Island was naturally seized upon by those who had been long advocating that isolated rock light stations should be made relieving, mainly on educational and religious grounds. In the House of Commons in February 1895, Captain McCalmont, aide-de-camp to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, asked the President of the Board of Trade *whether he was aware of the hardship inflicted on the keepers of rock lighthouses off the Irish coast by their not being made relieving stations; would he state how many of these rock lights have no relief; whether these lightkeepers with their families, are on these rocks for three or four years at a time, the children being of course*

without any opportunity for education of any kind; whether he is aware that these people suffered severely on some of the rocks during the recent gales, owing to flooding and want of fresh water; and whether, as the Board of Irish Lights are unable to carry out these reforms owing to want of funds, he would consider of providing the necessary funds for thus improving their condition?

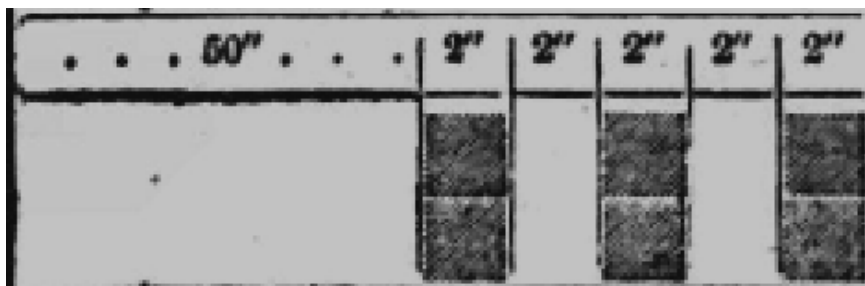
Mr. Bryce, the President, in reply, said they were fully aware of the difficulties in the sector. There were fourteen such light stations, he said, of which the most pressing were Slyne Head, the Maidens and Eagle Island (each with two lights) and Tearaght. He went on to say that it was true that *recently, on Eagle Island, in common with other stations, the lightkeepers suffered severely during the gales. The Commissioners of Irish Lights are, however, quite alive to the necessity for converting some of the more exposed stations into relieving stations whenever this can properly be done.* He also said that the Board of Trade were willing to consider on its merits any case presented to them (as reported in the *Northern Whig* 12th February 1895.)

It is clear that the severe hardship and danger that the Eagle Island families were subjected to was the catalyst for Irish Lights, an organisation known for its procrastinations, to spring into action. The situation was thrust upon them at Eagle Island but slowly, all the other stations became relieving – Skellig Michael and Inishtearaght in 1896, Slyne Head in 1898, Ballycotton in 1899 etc.

William Douglass recommended that, in the medium term, the East station should be closed and the light from the West station should be improved to compensate. In the meantime, he advocated using the dioptric lens with a multi (six) -wick oil lamp that had been lying in storage since being removed from Tory Island in 1887, not for the East station but for the West. The light was fixed. The East light, now repaired, should be worked by the keepers at the West light. The oft-quoted comment that the storm destroyed the East light was not quite true.

In effect, the status of Eagle Island was altered from a two-station location to a single station operating two lights. In consequence, the families would be withdrawn to the mainland, though the number of keepers would remain the same. There would always be three keepers on duty at any one time, with a fourth ashore.

Work progressed throughout the year to provide a more permanent solution. Eventually, on 1st November 1895, a *Notice to Mariners* was issued. The East light, it said, had been discontinued. The two lights hitherto exhibited had been replaced by *one white, occulting, 1st order dioptric light*, which would have the following characteristic – Light 50 seconds, Eclipse 2 seconds, Light 2 seconds, Eclipse 2 seconds, Light 2 seconds, Eclipse 2 seconds. For anybody confused, the Commissioner of Irish Lights even included a little diagram: -



The *one white, occulting, 1st Order dioptric light*, is of course lighthouse-speak and translates roughly as one white light where long periods of light alternate with shorter periods of darkness (occulting). It is a large seacoast light (the largest, visible for at least 20 miles) (1st order) and employs a lens system in which the rays of light are concentrated by refraction through a prism (dioptric.)

In addition to the white sector, there were also two red sectors, one to the north-east and one to the south-east to warn of the dangers landward of the island. One of the biggest dangers is the Edye Rock off Annagh Head, known locally as Mainistir, which is firmly in the second red sector.

Naturally, the East tower on the island, now of course extinguished, would have thrown a shadow and blocked the light from the West tower, so the lantern was removed and the tower lopped down and capped after the second set of circular stairs, roughly two meters above the level of the storm wall. It bears an uncanny resemblance to the proposed lighthouse on Capel Island in east Cork which was built to a height of two floors in 1851 before it was abandoned in favour of Ballycotton. The capping of that light was to preserve the tower, just in case it might be used as a lighthouse in the future. One can only assume that there was a possibility that the East light might be resurrected at some later stage, or they would have left it open to the elements.

The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage describes the East tower as follows: - *Freestanding single-bay three-stage lighthouse, sanctioned 1830; built 1836; extant 1838, on a circular plan. Damaged, 1850. Damaged, 1861. Destroyed, 1894. Truncated, 1895. In ruins, 1916. One of a pair. Slate hung battered walls on cut-granite chamfered plinth. Square-headed door opening with concealed dressings. Square-headed window openings with cut-granite sills, and concealed dressings with no fittings surviving. Set in shared grounds on outcrop with limewashed battered boundary wall to perimeter.*

According to Irish Light's official website, 20 feet was cut off the tower but this seems a very conservative estimate. The resulting stump appears to be no more than 30 feet high and the original height of the tower is widely reported as being 87 feet. This latter figure included the lantern but the maths would be the same.

In 1898, Chance Brothers & Co, the leading name in lens manufacture based in Smethwick, north of Birmingham, constructed a new light to replace the Tory Island reject that Eagle had been using for three years. It was a 1st order fixed lens with a characteristic of three white flashes every twenty seconds.

Four months after his heroics on Eagle Island, rookie Tom Ryan married farmer's daughter Catherine Galvin down in Kinsale. Their first child, Mary Anne was born the following year at Corclough. It would seem there was some housing available to Irish Lights at Corclough, though, as we shall see, the four purpose-built houses there were not ready for habitation until after 1900. Present at birth was Mary Margaret Ryan aka Polly. Another girl, Catherine Mary, was born at Corclough in 1899. After nearly six years on the rock, he was transferred to St. John's Point, county Down, shortly afterwards.

As for the families evacuated from Eagle Island, the Corish girls, Agnes and Josie, continued to write to Kincora in the *Weekly Irish Times*. The letters are either headed Blacksod Point or Blackrock Dwellings, which are the four terraced houses at Blacksod built

to house the families and keepers of the Blackrock light seven miles away, a light so remote and hostile it had been made relieving over thirty years previously.

Well, after our narrow escape on Eagle Island, we are at last settled in Blacksod or rather, in Blackrock Dwellings. I have a little friend here, Sarah Isabel Widdicombe. We all go to school every day and that is fine, the four eldest of us, also Isabel. The school is two miles from us and the chapel three ... I hope you have not had the influenza, dear Kincora. I don't hear of it down here at all. ... Josie Corish (*Weekly Irish Times* 13th April 1895)



The Blackrock Dwellings in Blacksod to where the Corishes were moved in 1895 (photo courtesy the National Library of Ireland)

Josie appears to have revised her opinion of Eagle Island as *a backward place*. On the 13th July, she wrote that she *would rather be on Eagle Island than on Blacksod*. The

Eagle is covered with seapinks after the storm that did such damage. There are seapinks here also but not as nice as the ones on Eagle Island. Maybe the two-mile walk to school in Aughlea every day had something to do with it! There's nothing as handy as coming downstairs and entering your classroom.

As previously mentioned, the tender for the four Eagle Island shore dwellings at Corclough was put out in late summer 1898. To view the specifications which had been drawn up by William Douglass, prospective builders were invited to see the plans either at the Ballast Board Office in Westmoreland Street in Dublin; or at the Coastguard House in Belmullet; or at the *Lightkeeper in Charge, Termoncarragh*.



The Irish Lights dwellings at Corclough West, now in private ownership (photo June 2022)

The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage describes each house individually. For the end, gable house, it says: - *End-of-terrace three-bay two-storey*

lighthouse keeper's house, designed 1897; built 1900; unoccupied 1901; occupied 1911, on a T-shaped plan centred on single-bay single-storey gabled projecting porch to ground floor. Vacated, 1955. Sold, 1956. Renovated to accommodate continued private residential use. One of a terrace of four. Pitched slate roofs including pitched (gabled) slate roof to porch with roll moulded clay ridge tiles, concrete coping to gables on cut-granite "Cavetto"-detailed corbel kneelers, and cast-iron rainwater goods on yellow brick header bond stepped eaves retaining cast-iron downpipes. Rendered walls on rendered chamfered plinth. Square-headed window openings with cut-granite sills and concealed yellow brick block-and-start surrounds framing replacement uPVC casement windows replacing six-over-six timber sash windows centred on four-over-four timber sash window. Set perpendicular to road in landscaped grounds with piers to perimeter having capping supporting barley twist-detailed wrought iron gate.

This block of four was typical of Irish Lights shore dwellings at the time. The two terraced houses facing the road were for the assistant keepers and their families; while the two end houses, facing up and down the road, which were slightly larger, were for the principal keepers.



The truncated East tower

The East station



This is not the East tower at Eagle Island. Doubtless a picture or a sketch exists somewhere in the Irish Lights archive but, in the absence of it coming to light, this is Loop Head lighthouse at the entrance of the Shannon estuary. At 75 feet, the tower is 12 feet shorter than Eagle East and it was constructed 20 years later, but as a guide, it is reasonable to assume they looked pretty similar. Loop Head has 74 steps and three landings – it is probable that Eagle had an extra floor.



Two representations of the East light. The one on the left is from the Beechey painting in the 1870s; the right is a Michael Costeloe reproduction of an 1860s Robert Calwell sketch



At the end of the storm wall, we come to the stump of the East tower at its eastern end. Note the 'slate hung battered walls.' Undoubtedly, it was the flying slates, every bit as much as the green waves that caused most of the danger to the families in 1894 (both photos on this page by Fergus Sweeney 2022)



*The East tower,
looking north (all
photos this page by
Fergus Sweeney)*

East tower entrance



*A somewhat bizarre photo from the first floor looking up to the second flight of stairs and
capped roof*



The East dwellings which suffered severe damage in the 1894 storm. It appears from the ruins that the houses faced south. All photos on this page by Fergus Sweeney



They were not damaged to this extent at the time but over the next 130 years, nature has taken its toll.

One hundred years from now, there may be simply rubble.



The 1900s

Stormy Seas

For some reason, the weather was very well-behaved during the first decade of the new century. Maybe it was taking a well-earned break after seeing off the East lighthouse.



Eagle from Frenchport 1905 (photo courtesy the National Library of Ireland)

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
John Lavelle	1894-1900		Frederick J. Duffy	1900-01
David M. Kennedy	1905		Mick Boyle	1899-1901
Jeremiah Trant	1905-09		Thomas Jones	1901-03
Edward Berrells	1909-17		Frederick Curling	1905
			Peter Lavelle	1905
			Charles Keenan	1905-07
Auxiliary			Richard J. O'Donnell	1905-10
Thomas Dixon?	1901		Thomas Byrne	1905-10
			Michael Roche	1907-12

A new century, but not necessarily new personnel. John Lavelle, who was principal keeper at Eagle Island West light during the great storm of December 1894 was recorded in the *Western People* of April 21st 1900 as having contributed five shillings to the testimonial for the Reverend M.J. Munnelly C.C., who was being transferred to Sligo and evidently needed the few bob.

Also listed as being on the island in 1900 was **Frederick Joseph Duffy (155)** who married Mary Anne McKenna in Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) in August of that year. Mary Anne's father was a carpenter in Kingstown but naturally there had to be a lighthouse connection. Her father Thomas was the son of Tom McKenna of the Maidens Lovers tale, who eloped from the county Antrim islands with Mary Anne Redmond in 1839.

There were two Frederick Duffy's serving as keepers at the time. Frederick William Duffy was the son of the keeper of the same name who had served on Eagle in the 1860s; Frederick Joseph was the son of Mick Duffy, also a keeper and probably a brother of the old Frederick William. FJ had been born on Mutton Island, where the lighthouse marked the inner approaches to Galway. He had joined Irish Lights on the first day of the last year of the nineteenth century. He made it to principal keeper in 1923 and retired from Youghal lighthouse in 1935. He died, still at Youghal in 1940.

Although the official Irish Lights history of Eagle Island states that the families of the keepers moved into the four purpose-built houses at the end of 1900, the 1901 census shows no occupancy. Mary Anne Duffy, Frederick Joseph's new bride, is shown in Corclough, but lodging with farmer Pat Gallagher and his family. The dwelling houses eventually were built at a cost of £530 3s 11d, according to a financial report for the year ending 31st March 1901.

Like Mary Anne Duffy, the keeper ashore for the census, **Michael 'Mick' Boyle (144)**, also 24 years old and unmarried, was shown lodging with elderly farmers Michael and Rosie Tighe, again in Corclough. Again, his father, Charles Boyle, had been a lightkeeper, and Mick had been born at the beautiful Ballynacourty lighthouse opposite Dungarvan in Waterford. He joined Irish Lights in early 1897 and served on Eagle Island from at least 1899, possibly earlier.



He was not to stay unmarried for long. Two years later, when he had moved to the pile light at Dundalk, he married one Julia Kennedy. Born on Oyster Island in 1880, she was the daughter of John Kennedy and Corclough girl Julia Gallagher, who had married in Erris in 1873.

Mick would become a principal keeper in 1919. He retired from Donaghadee in 1936 after six years at that station.

Michael and Julia Boyle

The three keepers on the island – naturally its smallest population on census day since construction began – were all relatively young men. **Thomas Jones (172)** (26) was the eldest, while **Thomas Dixon** and the previously mentioned Frederick Joseph Duffy were

only 24. Together with 24-year-old Michael Boyle onshore, that meant the combined ages of the four young men totalled less than 100 years, which seems surprisingly low for so important a station.

The reason for this is probably that, on the island, **Thomas Dixon** was marked on the census as being a “General Labourer” rather than a lightkeeper. Mayo-born, Thomas was probably a local man who stepped in as an emergency temporary keeper whenever one of the three keepers onshore needed to be absent for a short period of time for medical or personal reasons. There was also a batch of trainees, waiting at the Baily lighthouse in Dublin to be called out for just such relief duties, and it was great experience for them, but on distant rock stations, where the weather could turn in an instant, it was often found better to get the local man, who was always fully trained in the light tending business, onto the island as quickly as possible, rather than wait two days for the Baily trainee to arrive.

The Dixons of course are well represented on the plaque at Scotchport as part of the team that provided the reliefs to and from Eagle Island. Fishermen and farmers, they knew the shoreline inside out and Thomas Dixon would have been a valuable member of the small team. Frank Pelly says the position of a temporary keeper was jealously coveted by families and woe betide any interloper who was asked out to the light instead!

The elder statesman of the triumvirate on Eagle was 26-year-old, Donegal-born Thomas Jones. In December 1903, while still keeping light at Eagle, he married Sarah Anne Keenan. His father, Edward, was a farmer, not the normal route for a man to get into the lightkeeping service but, as Tom would doubtless say, it wasn’t unusual. The Jones family of Malinbeg for years held the boat contract for Rathlin O’Beirne, and, although Tom’s birth does not appear to have been registered, it is almost certain that he was a son of Edward, the boat contractor cum farmer and fisherman, having been born in Malinbeg in 1874. He had joined the service in October 1900.

Sarah Anne – for some reason, the marriage cert lists her as Mary Anne, even though she clearly signs it Sarah Anne – happened to be living in Corclough at the time. Daughter of retired keeper Patrick Keenan and born in Broadhaven lighthouse when the latter was serving there in 1872, she was keeping house for her brother **Charles Keenan (123)**, who was stationed on Eagle Island. Charles had been born on the Copeland Islands in 1873, in the days when the light there shone from Lighthouse Island (aka Cross Island) rather than the current Mew Island. He entered the lightkeeping service on the first day of 1895.

Charles served at Eagle Island as assistant keeper until 1907. In 1910, he married Hannah Butler, daughter of pilot Edmond Butler who plied his trade guiding ships in and out of Cork harbour. In 1921, at the young age of 46 and serving as principal keeper for three years at Blackhead lighthouse in county Antrim, he developed septicaemia and died at Mercers Hospital, Dublin.

The surname Stocker spans practically the whole history of lightkeeping in Ireland all the way back to 1828 when one Edward Stocker was tending the new light on Lighthouse Island in the Copelands, some sixty years prior to its transferral to Mew Island. His son, the exotically named Henry Aquila Stocker served at many stations from Rathlin to Fastnet, including Eagle Island. One of these was Oyster Island, on the approaches to Sligo, where, in 1869 **Leonard Victor Stocker (102)** was born. Naturally, with a number after his name, he became a lightkeeper and while serving as an assistant keeper on Eagle Island, he, and his wife Mary, had one of their many children, Cecil, who later continued the family

tradition. Leonard would return in 1917 as principal keeper. His service record indicates he served as assistant keeper on Eagle Island for 2 years 3 months, probably around the period 1902 – 1905.

David Moore Kennedy (85) was the principal keeper in 1905, when he was roughly 45 years of age. His father had been a fisherman in Buncrana and his wife, Catherine Stewart, was also from the locality. They were both Church of Ireland. Another who died young enough, he developed gangrene of the lung while retired at Killybegs and died in March 1907. It is likely he was transferred from Eagle Island to Rotten Island in 1905.

Following David Kennedy as principal keeper was **Jeremiah Trant (98)** who, despite his name, was not English or indeed protestant but a catholic, born in January 1864 in Portmagee in co. Kerry, son of a small farmer and fisherman. Prior to becoming a keeper in August 1891, he had operated the lighthouse tender between Portmagee and Skellig Michael. With his wife, Ellen, and young family in tow, he had been summonsed down from the comfortable station at Inishowen to join Eagle Island on promotion to PK. His son, Maurice was born at Corclough in 1908 and he was transferred out to Wicklow Head in 1909. Another of his sons, John-Michael, would follow in his footsteps, becoming a lightkeeper and indeed principal keeper at Eagle in the 1930s. Sadly, five of Jeremiah's six children died in their early twenties, mostly of tuberculosis. A small, quiet man, he later retired to his home village of Portmagee where he died at the ripe old age of 82.

Of the assistant keepers, **Frederick Curling (126)** was there in 1905. He was born in 1873 at Brown's Bay, near Ferris Point, county Antrim, the son of a boatman in the coastguard. The sons of coastguards often got preferential treatment when applying for lightkeeping posts, which Fred did in 1895. Like keepers, coastguards were often posted to lonely, isolated posts around the coast and would need the same stoic, placid personalities to cope with that.

Frederick was at Inis Oirr lighthouse on the Aran Islands when he married in 1898 and at the Tuskar for the 1901 census. His daughter Edith was born down there in August 1904 but his five-year-old daughter Sarah died of diphtheria in Corclough in February 1905. Fred was made a PK in 1916 and retired from Youghal lighthouse in 1933.

Peter Lavelle (133) was another who left the station in 1905. He was born two days before Christmas in 1873 on Rathlin Island, where his father, John Lavelle was stationed. (John we met previously at the West station during the storm of December 1894 – Peter was also on the island at that time) He married Elizabeth, daughter of Matthew Healy, who was principal keeper of the West station in the 1880s. (There really should be one big lightkeepers, family tree to consult here!) In the 1920s, their son, Jack, became the third generation of Lavelles to serve on the rock. Another of their ten children, John, also became a keeper.

Peter joined the service in 1896 and rose to become PK in 1919. He retired from Balbriggan in 1933 and died in Dublin ten years later.

Richard Joseph O'Donnell (178) was assistant keeper between 1905 and 1910, during which time he married Ellen, the daughter of Anthony Gallagher, who had the tender for the relief boat from Scotchport. He himself was the son of lightkeeper John O'Donnell, having been born at the Baily lighthouse in Dublin. Ellen and Richard had three children in Corclough before he was transferred to Dundalk. In 1916, he was fined £5 in Downpatrick

for making anti-British remarks in a public house. He died in 1969 in Balbriggan aged 88 years.



The wedding in Bangor in 1903 of two former Eagle Island inhabitants. The bride, Elizabeth Healy (aka Granny Lavelle) was born on the island in 1882. Her father, keeper, Matthew Healy, is lounging bottom left. The groom is Peter Lavelle, who was in the West tower during the storm of 1894. His father, John Lavelle, also a keeper, could be the man standing on the right-hand side. As James Lavelle, Peter's brother, also a keeper, was the best man, I would guess he is the man sitting on the right of the middle row but I wouldn't put more than a fiver on it. (Photo courtesy Trish Lavelle)

A contemporary of Richard was **Thomas Joseph Byrne (159)**, a Dub of 28 years when he rolled up in 1905. For some reason, *Bright Light*, *White Water* has a William Sugrue down as Service number 159. Thomas' father had been a ship's captain, based in Irishtown, when Tom was born in 1876 and Thomas married Lizzie Power while stationed at Roancarrig in county Cork in 1901, three years into his lightkeeping career. Their daughter Kathleen was born at Corclough in 1908; Lizzie had had son David the year before at home in Castletown. Thomas served on Eagle until 1910.

He was made a principal keeper in 1919 in 1923 and came back to Eagle in this capacity in 1929. He eventually retired from Balbriggan in 1936.

Michael Roche (222) was assistant keeper on Eagle Island between 1907 and 1912. Born in 1882 in, appropriately, Roches Point, his birth does not appear to have been registered but he was probably the son of coastguard, John Roche. Eagle Island appears to have been his first posting. He married Cassie Breslin, a Donegal teacher, in Binghamstown in 1908. Cassie, from Ardara in southwest Donegal, had come to the Mullet to supervise the inception of a lace-making industry.

Two children, imaginatively named John and Mary, were born in Corclough in 1909 and 1910 respectively. In 1914/15, Michael had the honour of spending seven months on the Skellig without relief. Two of his sons, Jack and Willie became keepers too, both of them serving at Eagle. Michael retired from Greenore in 1942.

The 1900s

A white paper showing the income and expenditure of the General Lighthouse Fund for the year ending 31st March 1902 was issued in early 1903 and naturally made for riveting viewing. The £30,000 spent on “new works in building houses” was spent on nine lighthouses, four light vessels and a buoy. Eagle Island Lighthouse was one of the nine, though compared to the others the outlay was minimal – just £216 9s 3d, bringing the total spend on that particular project to £1013 6s. Presumably this latter figure included the £530 laid out for the new dwellings in the financial year 1900-1901.

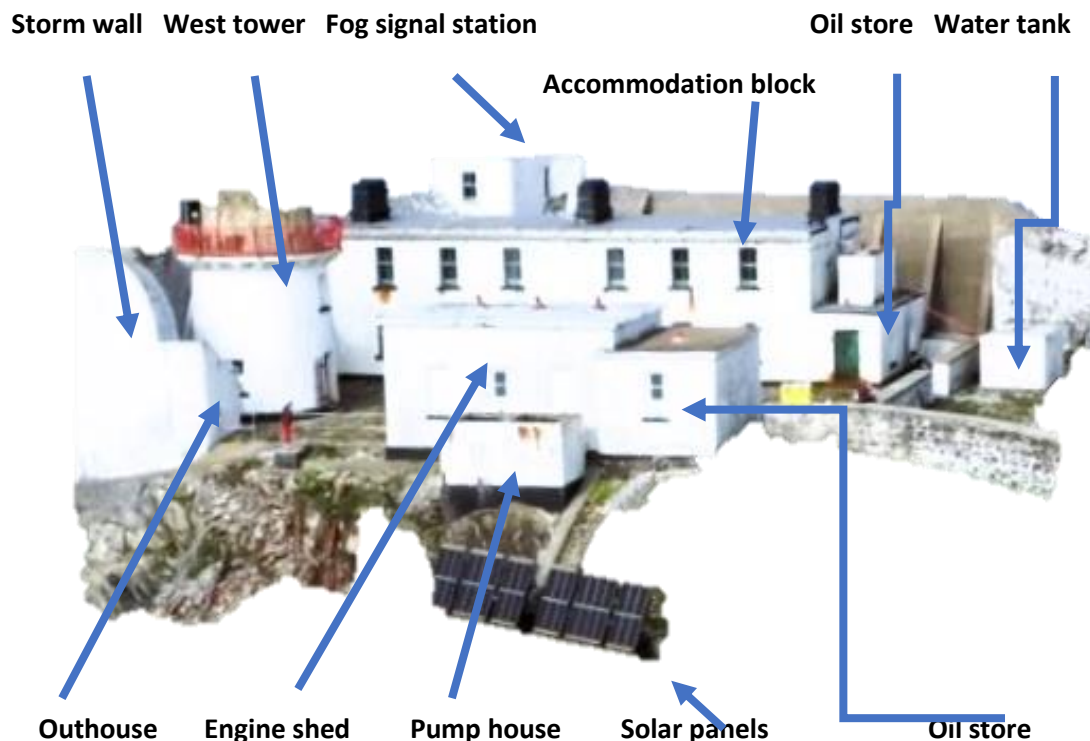
The publication of the fund accounts for the year ending 31st March 1903 drew a scathing response from the *Journal of Commerce* when they landed on its desk in February 1904. *Considering the management of the Irish Lighthouse Board, the discrepancies which occur are really not surprising*, it remarked, before questioning the outlay detailed at various stations, such as the outlay of over £3,400 on a fog signal at the Bull Rock that should cost £1,000 at the outside and why £20,000 extra was spent on the Fastnet works than had been budgeted for. It also raised a wry eyebrow at the miserly £100 spent on improving the light at Eagle Island.

Obviously, the Irish Lights board sat up and took notice for, when the same accounts were published for the year ending 31st March 1904, they had doubled their spend on Eagle Island to £204, bringing their total cost on improving the light to £1,217 16s 8d.

On May 22nd 1909, the *Western People* reported another case of illegal fishing in Irish waters. The captain of the *SS Hebdon* from Fleetwood was accused of trawler fishing two miles inside the limits imposed by the Department of Fisheries. The captain and his mate were adamant that they had stayed well outside of Eagle Island; eye witnesses said they had not. The mate however was the star of the show, giving a comedic performance that wouldn't have been out of place on the boards of the Theatre Royal.

Despite his engaging performance, the captain was fined £100 with costs.

The West Station



Plan of the West station from a Fergus Sweeney photo

The West light was established in 1835 but, as we have heard, building work continued for several years afterwards, probably due, in no small measure, to a large storm in January 1836 which, it is said, damaged the dwelling houses and probably much more.



(Photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022)

Entering the yard, you are confronted by the lighthouse tower, surprisingly small. In fact the second floor brings you to the optic, or at least it did when the light still had a lantern. Standing on the highest point of the island, the tower didn't need to be tall, as the top of the storm wall was already 200 feet above the sea. For anybody who might be worried, the tower isn't on fire – it's just a cloud.

On the left-hand side of the yard, as you face the tower, the larger building housed the fog signal compressors. These engines pumped the air through piping under the ground, to the air receivers in the fog signal station out the back. The smaller building to the left was an oil store. In former times, there was also a toilet on this side of the yard, which posed problems for keepers who needed to go when a storm was raging.



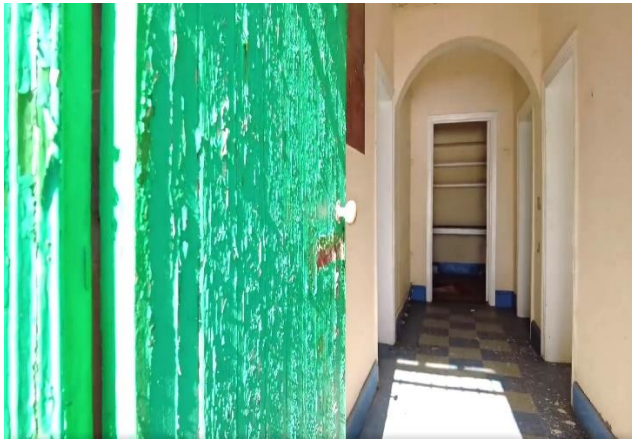
*The left-hand side of the compound yard
(photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022)*

The accommodation block consisted of one house for the keepers (the one nearest the tower) and the other for visiting tradesmen, painters, technicians, fitters etc. Naturally, in the nineteenth century there was a house for each keeper and his family plus alternative accommodation for others.

Latterly, a door was installed between the two dwellings at the top of the stairs which gave access to the toilet and shower room for the tradesmen in the keepers' dwellings.

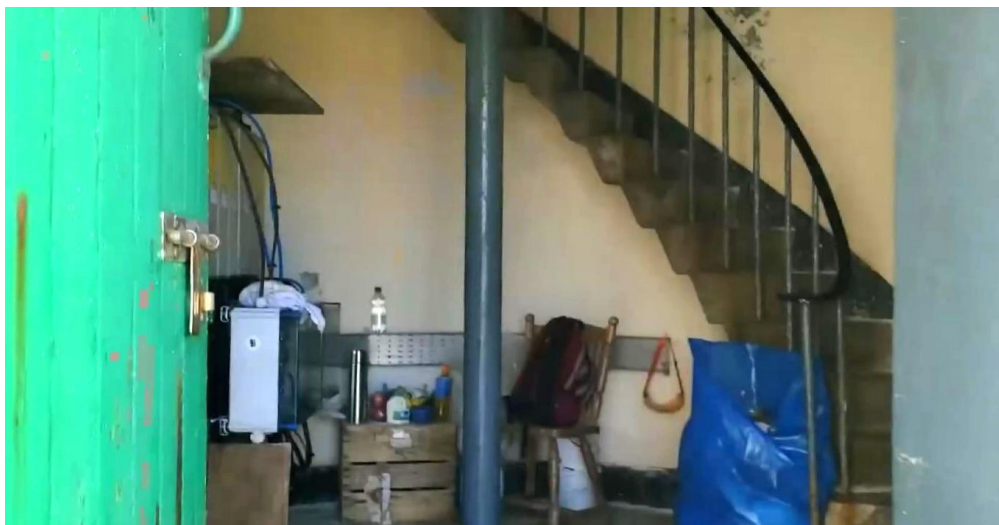
The accommodation block. Note the flat felt bitumen roof. Irish Lights were presumably sick of replacing slates after every storm! (photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022)





Dwelling house entrance (photo Fergus Sweeney 2022)

Wonderful photo from the southwest by Fergus Sweeney 2022. The buildings visible behind the storm wall are L-R the East tower, the Radio Beacon mast, the fog signal station, the accommodation block and the West tower. The tiny two-acre island of Carrighesk (just to the left of the beacon mast) is clearly visible as the Mullet peninsula stretches up to Erris Head and the Stags of Broadhaven.



Entrance to the West tower (photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022)

The Fog Signal

Unlike their counterparts on the east and south coasts of Ireland, Eagle Island and the other west and north coast lights did not seem to suffer greatly from the dense fogs that could last days at a time. Unsheltered, the westerly and south-westerly winds had free rein when assailing the western seaboard and any foggy incursions were simply swept away on the brisk breezes.

With the end of the first decade only a few weeks away, a group of masters and officers of the Mercantile Marine trading to the west coast of Ireland and representing the Merchant Service Guild, wrote to Irish Lights urging them to establish fog signals on the badly neglected west coast of Ireland.

At present, the letter ran, there is a coastline of 200 miles from Loop Head, at the entrance of the River Shannon, to Tory Island, or from the Skelligs (once the intended fog signal is established there) a distance of 240 miles to Tory Island without a fog signal to assist in navigating a difficult coastline.

From Loop Head to Tory Island is a series of turning points (viz : Loop Head to Slyne Head; Slyne Head to Inishark Island; Inishark Island to Blackrock; Blackrock to Eagle Island; Eagle Island to Tory Island.)

On no part of the British coastline is there such a distance without fog signals, and the West coast of Ireland is subject to thick, misty weather, especially with the prevailing S.W. winds, as well as ordinary fog in almost any month of the year. We would especially like to impress the authorities with the need of fog signals at the most important turning points of Tearaght Island, Blackrock and Eagle Island, which, if established, would prove a boon and a safeguard to those navigating this coastline.

Trusting this memorial will be the means of the Lights Commissioners granting those necessary safeguards to navigators. The memorial was signed with fifteen names.

A fog signal on Eagle Island was again requested in 1910 and 1914 but it was not until 1917 that, at the expense of the Admiralty, an explosive fog signal was installed. Although the Admiralty intimated that they had no further use for the fog signal in 1920 the Commissioners retained it at the station until the Irish Free State Army removed the explosive charges in May 1923. A Notice to Mariners was then issued to say that, due to the unreliability of the explosive fog signal, you might not hear it. The fog signal was discontinued but was re-established in July 1924 when the charges were returned.

In September 1927, a diaphone fog signal replaced the explosive fog signal. This was a more mechanical and complicated apparatus but soon became the standard fog-signal worldwide. There were less dangers than those attending on the cannon and was less work for the keepers as they were mechanically operated.

In 1962, three new air compressors to feed the diaphone were installed on Eagle,

During periods of fog, when keepers were unable to communicate with the mainland through flags, diaphone fog signals were used to belch out morse code to the shore. It is doubtful whether they could be answered of course, as the number of households possessing a diaphone fog-signal in Corclough or Gladree must have been quite limited.

From April 1978, the light at Eagle Island was exhibited in poor visibility when the fog signal was sounding.

NOTICE TO MARINERS.

WEST COAST OF IRELAND.

EAGLE ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE.

INTENDED ALTERATION IN CHARACTERISTIC OF LIGHT AND ESTABLISHMENT OF DIAPHONE FOG-SIGNAL.

Irish Lights Office,
Dublin, 1st November, 1926.

The COMMISSIONERS OF IRISH LIGHTS hereby give Notice that it is intended at an early date TO ALTER THE CHARACTERISTIC of EAGLE ISLAND LIGHT from Group Occulting to a Group Flashing Light giving three flashes in quick succession every ten seconds.

The FORMER RED SECTORS of this Light WILL BE ABOLISHED and A TEMPORARY APPARATUS WILL BE USED to give the characteristic until the permanent light is established.

It is also intended at an early date TO ALTER THE FOG-SIGNAL at this station from Explosive giving one Report every two minutes TO A DIAPHONE FOG-SIGNAL giving a group of Three Blasts of two seconds duration with intervals of two seconds between them every minute.

Further Notice will be given when the above Light is permanently established and the Diaphone Fog-Signal is put into operation.

Approximate Geographical Position of EAGLE ISLAND LIGHT:—

Latitude:— 54° 17' N.
Longitude:— 10° 05' W.

By Order,
J. B. PHELPS, Secretary.

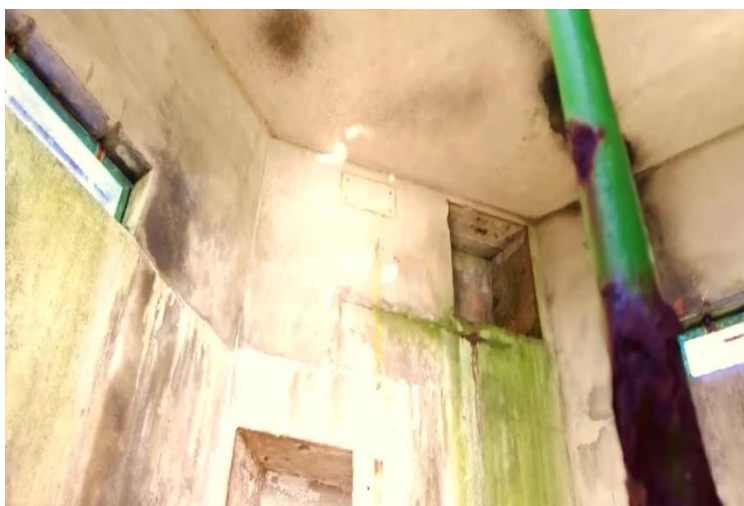
Notice to Mariners November 1927. The two red sectors to the north-east and south east have been extinguished and the characteristic of the light has altered from occulting to flashing. In addition, the old explosive fog signal is to be replaced by a diaphone fog signal, operated by compressed air. It was reported by local fishermen that the explosive fog signal had been killing large numbers of fish.

The fog station located at the corner of the wall (photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022)



Fog station entrance (photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022) The air receivers were housed in here.

Location of the diaphone, sounded through the square aperture. This is a still from Fergus Sweeney's video on Blacksod lighthouse's Facebook page. As he climbed the ladder to reach the room, a bird flew out. The building is empty – the machinery went over the cliff.



Lightkeepers, both on lighthouses and lightships, around Ireland were required to note down the duration of any foggy spells they experienced throughout the year, resulting in the foghorns being sounded. In 1943, meteorologist F.E. Dixon collected this information

for a 23-year period from fourteen light stations around the country in an attempt to predict patterns and compare different coastlines on visibility grounds.¹¹

His problem, though, as he soon found out, was that whereas, at meteorological stations, the visual range was measured by the clarity of a known object at a fixed distance from the station, no such clearly defined measures were used at the fog signal stations. It was very much down to the principal keeper's opinion as to whether the fog signal needed to be activated. Some keepers were inclined to sound them when there was a bit of a mist about; others waited until they were enveloped in a pea-souper fog and couldn't see the hand in front of their face.

As a result, significant differences occurred in the monthly findings of two stations that might be relatively close; or a station that had been fog-shrouded for years might suddenly become a paragon of visibility when a new keeper was appointed.

To be fair to F.E., he acknowledges this and states that he could not therefore use the figures to investigate the distribution of fog around the coast, as planned, but he could give average monthly figures for the stations.

Place	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Year
	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs	hrs
Tory I.	30	29	30	26	20	32	34	22	23	26	12	17	301
Rathlin I.	5	15	15	19	33	36	37	33	18	6	3	5	225
Blackhead	33	45	47	20	26	29	37	36	24	17	26	26	369
Bailey	20	26	30	19	29	15	14	14	14	11	20	23	235
Kish	50	74	95	67	95	64	57	56	45	44	50	44	741
Arklow	121	149	199	139	192	135	126	122	124	113	96	120	1636
Lucifer	144	170	199	152	219	138	158	149	144	137	127	136	1973
Hook Point	17	25	27	23	44	27	31	36	26	23	22	21	322
Barrels	110	145	158	118	159	114	126	137	113	102	86	105	1483
Daunts	56	62	78	49	75	60	66	86	66	63	52	53	766
Fastnet	39	38	43	43	73	47	86	76	63	53	50	40	651
Mizen Head	48	53	45	38	77	57	92	81	70	63	53	48	725
Loop Head	36	33	28	23	32	46	45	41	42	29	32	38	425
Eagle I.	23	19	25	21	28	50	42	40	40	30	21	28	367

Table 1. Monthly and Annual Averages of Fog Duration 1916 – 1938

In general, it appears that lightships are generally more fog-bound than land stations, which may be partly accounted for by distance from land and height above sea level but there are some points of uniformity. The west coast stations (Eagle, Mizen and Loop Head) are generally foggier in the summer months, though well below the east coast averages.

F.E. then expressed these figures as a percentage of the annual total and split them into two categories – coastal and island / lightships:

¹¹ Department of Industry and Commerce Internal Memo 1 / 43 Fog at Irish Lighthouses and Lightships 1916-38

Place	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Coastal												
Blackhead	9	12	13	5	8	8	10	9	7	5	7	7
Bailoy	9	11	<u>13</u>	8	12	6	6	6	6	5	8	10
Hook Point	5	8	<u>8</u>	7	14	8	10	11	8	7	7	7
Mizen Head	7	7	6	5	<u>10</u>	8	<u>13</u>	11	10	9	7	7
Loop Head	8	8	6	5	8	<u>11</u>	<u>10</u>	10	10	7	8	9
Islands and Lightships												
Tory I.	10	9	10	9	7	10	<u>11</u>	7	8	9	4	6
Rathlin I.	2	6	6	8	15	16	<u>17</u>	15	8	3	2	2
Kish	7	10	13	9	13	8	<u>8</u>	7	6	6	7	6
Arklow	7	9	<u>12</u>	9	<u>12</u>	8	8	7	8	7	6	7
Lucifer	8	9	<u>11</u>	8	<u>12</u>	7	8	8	8	7	7	7
Barrois	7	10	11	8	<u>11</u>	8	8	9	8	7	6	7
Daunts	7	8	10	6	<u>10</u>	8	9	<u>11</u>	9	8	7	7
Fastnet	6	6	7	7	11	7	13	<u>12</u>	9	8	8	6
Eagle I.	6	5	7	6	8	<u>14</u>	<u>11</u>	11	11	8	6	7
Mean												
Coastal	8	9	9	6	<u>11</u>	8	10	9	8	7	7	8
Islands & Lightships	7	8	9	8	<u>11</u>	10	10	10	8	7	6	6

Table 2. Percentage of annual fog duration experienced on a monthly basis

The results show, says F.E., that Loop Head and Eagle Island both experience the most amount of fog in June, in contrast to Fastnet and Mizen, where June is relatively fog-free. And at the four stations on the east coast where industrial pollution is rife, March is the worst month. Also, it is strange to point out that April is less foggy than either March or May.

Like many others, local Inniskea and Mullet historian, Thomas Ban O'Raghallaigh, remembers the whooping noise with a fond remembrance; *As a young lad growing up in Surgeview, he says, it was many a time I heard the long mournful drone of the fog horn coming from Eagle which sadly went silent when modern technology made it redundant.*

The end of an era occurred on Eagle Island in May 1985, not simply for the keepers but for the whole population of the north Mullet peninsula. In that month, the fog signal that had blasted out its mournful cry for over seventy years, fell silent, to be heard no more.

Anthony Gallagher, son of the late Eagle Island PK John Gallagher, recounts how he once got a job in the 1980s after the fog signal had been deactivated. *Our instructions, he states, were to strip out the old fog signal machinery and put the new fuel tanks inside the shed instead. When we asked what we should do with the old fog signal machinery, we were told to tip it over the edge of the cliff. So that's what we did.*

Peter Deaton remembers the two Ruston Hornsby horizontal engines that drove the fog signals. *They had two huge flywheels, he says, and, in the end, they went over the cliff like they did in a lot of places. They were too heavy for the helicopter, I suppose. I'm not sure if it was an official order but they were dumped. And the thing is, they're absolutely priceless nowadays.*

Twenty-six years after the demise of the fog signal, John Cuffe, local Belmullet man and former keeper, wrote an enchanting eulogy for this popular character in the *Western People* (1st February 2011) from both sides of the fence. The piece was entitled *The Eagle Ear* and it was written on the occasion of the last foghorns on Irish coasts being discontinued by the Commissioners of Irish Lights. I would love to transcribe the whole of the article as it's such a beautiful piece, but I would probably get done for plagiarism, so here are just a few brief snippets.

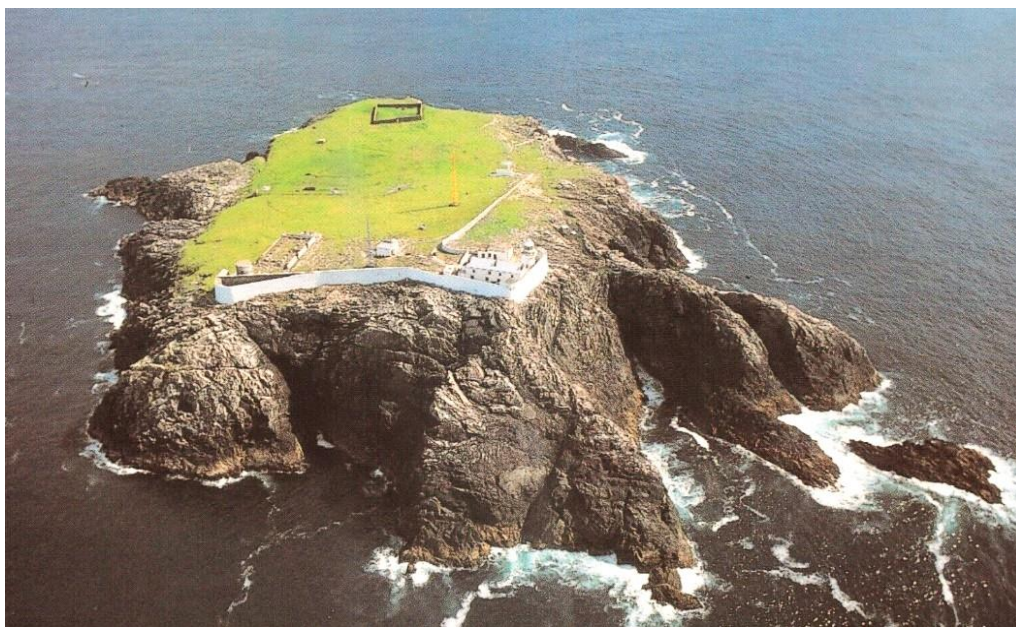
I lived 12 miles from Eagle Island... (It) was equipped with a fog-signal. As a child, the mournful lowing of Eagle could be heard from Porturlin down to Blacksod. The sneaky fog slipped its way past Blackrock and Inniskea but, once Eagle scented its grey breath, it warned all and sundry.

Eagle Island foghorn gave the fog a voice. The grey pea soup that silently slipped across the ocean was now identified by sound. To a child in Blacksod, the foghorn was a soothing sound. It reminded me of a cow reassuring its calf, with a hint of menace should it stray too far. Wooooooh... wooh... wooh it went.

The novelist Joseph O'Connor recently wrote that he was reassured as a child by the sound of the foghorn. If he woke at night, its soothing sound made him feel safe in his pitch-black bedroom. As I read my Beano or Victor, it did the same to me...

Like the toll of a church bell, like the fading cuckoo and the ring of the old postman's bell on his bike, the foghorn has seen its time docked. I am sad; sad that I will never hear it again, sadder that my children never heard it at all...

And while we surrender ourselves to modernity, daily we let things slip away that made us pause. The peal of the Angelus bell, the smell from the bakery, the shriek of a bird and the blast of old Mr. Foghorn.



View of the island from the west

The 1910s

The approach to Eagle Island is a most dangerous passage for a boat and in wild weather, such as has been recently experienced, it is cut off from the outer world – Irish Independent 21st January 1913

Stormy Seas

The *SS Staghound* of Glasgow arrived at Fenit from Ayr with a cargo of coal and a tale of a very distressing voyage. Off Eagle Island, a gale had been blowing and seas had been very high. A heavy sea struck the ship and knocked the captain off the bridge and onto the lower deck, causing serious injuries to his side and back. Two seamen were swept the entire length of the ship and only by a miracle escaped being thrown into the water and certain doom. The captain has had to leave the ship and a replacement is being sent from Cork – *Killarney Echo and South Kerry Chronicle*, Saturday 7th January 1911

The schooner *Annie M. Nadian*, sailing out of St. John's, Newfoundland with a cargo of codfish foundered off Eagle Island. The crew were brought safely to Broadhaven – *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, Monday 26th May 1919

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)	AK	Year(s)
Edward Berrells	1909-17	Richard J. O'Donnell	1905-10
Leonard Stocker	1917-19	Thomas Byrne	1905-10
James Sweeny	1919-23	Michael Roche	1907-12
		Neil Loughrey	1910-17
		John Crowley	1910-15
		A.J. Kennedy	1912-17
		William Evans	1915
		Charles Meehan	1915-17
		Richard Somers	1917
Other		Michael Bolger	1917-18
		John McShane	1917-18
Peter Williams (Temp)	1911	Benjamin Godkin	1917-23
Martin McAndrew (Temp)	1915	Charles Loughrey	1918-23
Thomas Colfer (SAK)	1917	William Wall	1918-23

There was a disproportionate number of keepers stationed on Eagle Island in the decade 1910 to 1919, three principal keepers and thirteen assistants, not to mention at least two auxiliary keepers drafted in from the mainland.

The 1911 census is the last one we will encounter as all later censuses are not yet available.

The three keepers on duty on the island were assistant keepers John Crowley (35) and Neil Loughrey (34), together with temporary assistant keeper Peter Williams (26).

In the four purpose-built houses in Corclough were Mary Margaret Loughrey (Neil's wife) and their four children, together with Mary Margaret's younger sister Bridget Ryan; PK Edward Berrells, his wife Minnie, their four children plus Edward's younger sister, Lilly; AK Michael Roche, his wife and two young children and a servant Mary Lally; and Emily Crowley and her two young daughters.

The fact that there was a temporary keeper on the island indicates that either Edward Berrells or Michael Roche was sick or injured or in some way incapacitated.

To start with the most important, **Peter 'Pete' Williams**, the temporary assistant, lived in Gladree, his house facing out to Eagle Island. (Temporary keepers, along with supernumerary keepers had no service numbers.) A member of Anthony Gallagher's relief rowing team, he participated for decades in bringing supplies, mail and personnel out to the island. He also acted as signalman on shore and was proficient in semaphore and morse code, which was done by bats, according to his granddaughter, Breege Lavelle. Born in 1884, he married Mary Deane in 1915, his best man being fellow Gladree man and relief rower, Pat Kilker. Interestingly, he had the handy skill of being in two places at the one time, being also recorded at his parents' home on the 1911 census, though one year older.

It was in 1909 that **Edward Daniel Berrells (113)** gained his Eagle wings as principal keeper but, as he spent the majority of his eight years on the island in the 1910s, it is here that we will record him. Although his name is sometimes written Birrells in Irish Lights, the name is spelt Berrells in certain civic documents, though neither name is particular common in Ireland, nor indeed anywhere else.

He had been born, along with his twin brother, Eugene, at the coastguard station in the (then) tiny seaside village of Greystones in county Wicklow in 1864. His father John may well have been the son of Captain Peter Berrells of the Irish Coastguard who had been born in Kerry in 1791.

Edward went to sea from an early age, like his twin brother, but opted for a life on *terra firma* by joining the lighthouse service in 1892. In 1903, he married Mary Anne (Minnie) Cunningham from Kilkeel, county Down, whom he evidently met while keeping light either at Haulbowline or Green Island / Vidal Bank. She was aged 24 and a widow woman at the time, nearly sixteen years his junior. They had three children, the third of whom, Edward, was born at Corclough in 1911, early in their stint at Eagle Island.

Edward (the father) joined Eagle Island on promotion to principal keeper on 1st November 1909 and left for St. John's Point, county Down on 7th July 1917. He died at Dundalk in 1928 aged 62 and was buried in Kilkeel.

Taking over from Edward as principal keeper at the end of 1917 was **Leonard Victor Stocker (102)**, part of the Stocker dynasty that had his grandfather at the Hook in 1830 and his father Henry – who served at Eagle in the 1860s – on Tory Island just in time to witness the sinking of the Royal Navy gunboat *Wasp* on the cliffs under the lighthouse in 1884. We met him as an AK in 1902. Leonard had been born on Oyster Island – his mother, Susan, was the daughter of another old keeper, Isaac Christie.

Leonard's career with Irish lights started on the lightships on the 1st February 1893 before joining the lighthouse division of the company four years later. He was promoted to principal keeper at Oyster Island in 1906. He returned to Eagle Island (from Blackrock

Mayo) as PK on St. Stephens Day 1917 and he oversaw the end of the Great War there, moving up to Fanad Point in October 1919. He retired from Mutton Island in 1928 and died in Galway in 1953. His sons, Cecil and Leonard, were keepers for many years.

Joseph James Sweeny (142) was the principal keeper on Eagle Island from 1919 to 1923 but we will include him here, even though he only arrived at the dog end of the decade.

He had been born in Greencastle, county Down, in 1875 while his father, Thomas was serving at Haulbowline. His mother was another Rathlin Islander, Annie McCouig. Joseph entered the service in December 1896 and served for forty years. He married one Kathleen Tolan in Mayo in 1904, whilst a keeper at Blacksod and had children there.

The surname Sweeney is of course synonymous with Blacksod in lightkeeping terms with a veritable dynasty serving there from the 1930s. People assume that J.J. and his son Frank, who also served at Eagle Island later, were related to the current Sweeney clan. Well, they were but not through the Sweeneys. (J.J.'s and Frank's surname is spelled without the third 'e.') Joseph's wife, Katherine Tolan, was a sister of Margaret Tolan, who married one Thomas Sweeney, father of Ted Sweeney, attendant at Blacksod for many, many years.

Joseph came to Eagle Island on promotion to principal keeper in 1919. He spent the last four years of his career at Duncannon North before retiring in 1935. He died in Dublin in 1941 aged 66.

With the arrival of assistant keeper **Neil Loughrey (179)** on the island in 1910, we indirectly welcome back another former Eagle Island resident to the area. Neil was born in November 1875 on the Inishowen peninsula in county Donegal, where his father Michael was a river pilot, a very dangerous job that entailed rowing or sailing out to large boats or ships entering the Foyle and guiding them down the estuary to Culmore, or beyond to Derry. Another son of Michael, Charles, we will meet later in the decade.

Neil (aka Neal) was a seaman aboard a ship in Liverpool on the 1901 census but three months later, he joined Irish Lights and the following year, he married one Mary Margaret Ryan while stationed at the Haulbowline lighthouse. Daughter Kathleen was born in 1903 and Francis and Michael followed when the family moved just down the coast to Dundalk.

One can only imagine Mrs. Loughrey's emotions on the day in 1910 when the letter from Irish Lights was brought around by the PK, informing her husband that he was being transferred to Eagle Island. For her last stay on the island had been quite traumatic. As Polly Ryan, it was she who had written the graphic account of the great storm of 1894 to her family in Cork.

Thankfully for Polly there was to be no repetition of the terror of that night. Three further children, Gerard, Mary and Neil, were born at Corclough during the ensuing eight years. Neil junior would return thirty years later as assistant keeper. In 1918, the family decamped to Ballycotton in county Cork, where their seventh and last child was born.

Neil senior retired in the 1930s from his last station on Rockabill. He continued working, though, for the Electrical Supply Board, in whose employ he was unfortunately electrocuted in 1945, while servicing a transformer station.

John Crowley (174), who served on the island from 1910 to 1915, was born in 1876 in Churchtown on the Hook peninsula, county Wexford, the son of lightkeeper Henry Crowley. He joined the family business in 1900. In 1902, he married 21-year-old Emily Williams, daughter of keeper James Williams. She had been born at Blacksod lighthouse, where her father was serving at the time. Her Uncle Henry was an ex-Eagle Island keeper.

John and Emily had several children, two of whom, Fran and Michael, were born at Corclough in 1912 and 1915 respectively. Never forgetting his roots, he donated five shillings to the Lady's Island, Wexford parish collection in 1914. The eldest girl, Mary Frances Crowley, became a highly celebrated nurse and educator. John left Eagle for Mine Head on 6th August 1915.

He received a lot of publicity just prior to his retirement in 1939 when he killed a 'sea-monster,' forty-eight feet long, twenty-six feet in circumference and weighing three tons, while serving at Mutton Island, Galway. The body was hauled out of the water and became quite a tourist attraction for the few days following. John died in Dublin in 1942 aged 66.

Another Wexford native was on the Eagle from 1912 to 1917. **Anthony John Kennedy (244)** had been born when his father served at Duncannon in county Wexford in 1886 but we have already met his parents, John Kennedy and Corclough girl Julia Gallagher, when they married in Belmullet in 1873.

He joined the service in July 1910 and thus Eagle came quite early in his career. While serving there in 1914, he married Bridget Monks, daughter of a police sergeant from Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire). Two of their children, Mary (1915) and John (1916) were born at Corclough. The family was transferred to the Baily in Howth on 18th August 1917. Their third child, Julia Maud, was born at Howth in 1918. A further three children were born unto them.

Anthony was promoted to principal keeper when he joined the Fastnet in 1936 and retired from Drogheda West in 1946, on reaching the compulsory retirement age of sixty. He died in Wicklow in 1963 aged 77.

Someone who does not appear on Frank Pelly's list is **William Evans (258)** which indicates he was not on Eagle for very long. However, he is mentioned in despatches during the rescue of the shipwrecked crew of the S.S. *Cherbury* in May 1915.

William Edward Evans was born in 1888 in Skerries, north county Dublin, where his father was the harbourmaster for many years. He joined Irish Lights on the first day of 1913, so Eagle Island was one of his first stations also. By 1917, he was at Wicklow Head where he married Louise Smith from Dunbur, where the lighthouse is located. After spells at Rockabill, St. John's Point, county Down and Mew Island, he was sent to the Bull Rock on promotion in August 1937. Unfortunately, while visiting his wife's family in Wicklow while on shore leave in March 1939, he suddenly collapsed and died, aged a mere fifty-one years. He is buried in his native Skerries.

Thomas Michael Colfer was on Eagle Island on April 26th 1917, two months before he got his number **(268.)** As the surname suggests, he was born in southwest Wexford and was the son of a sea-captain turned farmer. He had joined Irish Lights in November 1914 and so he was quite an experienced supernumerary keeper and thirty years old when Neal Loughrey left him alone on the rock. He finally was made an assistant keeper in July 1917. He married Kate Mernagh while serving at Kinsale in 1919 and later spent seven years at his local Hook lighthouse. He retired from Mine Head in 1946.

Charles Meehan (263) was assistant keeper at the station from 1915 to 1917. Born at Roches Point in 1891, his father, also Charles, had been a keeper at Eagle in the 1880s and his mother, Kate Healy, was daughter of Matthew Healy who had been PK on Eagle Island in the early 1880s.

Charles was a single man during his short time on the island. He married in the 1920s and had three children. He was made a PK in 1938 while on Tory Island. He died in Dublin in his nineties. His son would later serve on Eagle.

Richard Senan Somers (129) was on Eagle in 1917. He had been born on Scattery Island in the Shannon estuary, hence the middle name. (St. Senan was the ecclesiastical patriarch of Scattery Island.) Richard's father, Bernard, had been the first keeper on the island. Richard married Margaret Dwyer in Castletownbere in 1897 while stationed at Roanacarrig and had three boys and one girl.

He obviously did nothing wrong during the short time he was here because he was promoted to PK on transfer the same year. He retired from the Hook in 1933 and died in Navan in 1952.

Assistant lightkeeper **Michael Bolger (262)**, born 1888, was present on the station in 1917 and 1918. His father was Stephen Bolger, a farmer, and Michael joined the service in 1913. He was made assistant keeper in 1915 and sent to Fanad, so Eagle Island must have been one of his early appointments. He married Brigid McLoughlin while stationed up at St. John's Point, county Down two years later and they had seven children. He was promoted to principal keeper at the Old Head of Kinsale in 1940. In 1945, he was transferred to Blackhead, co. Antrim, but died in June of that year.

For all the wrong reasons, we know somewhat more about **John McShane (269)**, born in Glencolumbkille to a farmer in 1889. He had been a fisherman before taking up a position with Irish Lights, which he joined in 1914, and came to Eagle as an SAK in July 1917. Ten days later, he was promoted to assistant keeper. Unfortunately, like millions of others, he contracted the dreaded Spanish flu and was immediately transferred to Belmullet workhouse hospital, where he succumbed a few weeks later on 19th November 1918. He was 28 years old and unmarried and had been in perfect health prior to his diagnosis.

A memo to lighthouse staff by Irish Lights medical adviser, Dr. Lumsden, had been circulated by Irish Lights secretary, Hubert G. Cook, at the start of the pandemic. It said that: -

Having regard to the prevalence of Influenza at present, the following advice, as given by the Board's Consulting Medical Adviser, is hereby transmitted for the information of the employees of the Commissioners of Irish Lights.

The symptoms are generally ushered in by pains in the limbs, loss of appetite, headache, sometimes nausea and frequently cough.

An aperient should be taken at once, either a table-spoonful of Epsom Salts in hot water, or a purgative pill or two.

Two grains of Quinine twice daily is helpful.

If the patient feels sick, or has pain in the side, with cough, it is advisable to go to bed at once, and if not better in a few hours, the Doctor should be sent for without delay.

Most of the serious conditions and complications of the disease arise from want of care in the initial stage and exposure or chill – and therefore a day or two in bed generally helps the affection (sic – probably should be 'affliction') being thrown off.

It should be noted in view of the last sentence that poor John McShane's death was partly due to pneumonia. Irish Lights was obliged to issue the message because, naturally,

keepers at rock stations could not benefit from the emergency professional healthcare that the rest of the country did.

Four Irish lightkeepers died of the so-called Spanish flu (it didn't originate in Spain at all) out of the 23,000 who died between spring 1918 and spring 1919 in Ireland and the 50 million who succumbed worldwide. Another two keepers contracted the disease at the time but made full recoveries.

Benjamin Godkin (196) was born in Courtown co. Wexford in 1877 to a fisherman, who later became a ship's captain. Benjamin joined the merchant marine first before joining Irish Lights in 1902, two years prior to marrying Emily Hudson of Monkstown, co. Dublin. His brother William Harry also became a lightkeeper and served at Blacksod for a time. Benjamin himself was serving at Loop Head in 1904, when he was promoted to assistant keeper. Two girls arrived when they were stationed at Wicklow Head lighthouse.

On Eagle Island from 1917 to 1923, he was made principal keeper in 1930 and retired in 1937. He died in Jordanstown in 1963.

When Neil Loughrey left the island in 1918, he was replaced by his brother, **Charles Loughrey (199)** Born in 1880, he was five years younger than brother Neil but he was already a widower. Whilst serving at St. John's Point, county Donegal in 1911, he had married Lucy Cassidy, daughter of a local Dunkineely merchant. They had two daughters, Bridget and Theresa, before Lucy tragically died of T.B. in the summer of 1916, aged only 26.

One may assume the Cassidy family cared for the girls until they were old enough to join their father. There was a disturbing court case in 1948, where a member of the Cassidy family defaced the headstone put up by Charles in Bruckless graveyard.

Charles made principal keeper at Slyne Head in 1930 and retired from his home lighthouse, Inishowen, in 1940. He remained in Inishowen until his death in 1954, with Theresa present at the end.

And finally, there was **William Wall (234)**, who, like Charles, served as assistant keeper from 1918 to 1923. He had been born in Merchants Quay, Cork in 1885, the son of a vintner and joined the service in 1908. He married Georgina O'Brien in Ballycotton in 1920, while stationed at Corclough. A girl, Mary Margaret Pauline, was born there the following year.

William served on many stations after leaving Eagle. He was at Bull Rock from 1929 to 1932 and Rockabill from 1932 to 1934, when he was promoted to principal keeper at Skellig Michael in 1934. He subsequently was placed in charge of the fog signal station at Poer Head in east Cork and the handy number of Dun Laoghaire.

He retired from Balbriggan lighthouse in 1945 and then became attendant at Youghal, a position he carried on until 1951 when, aged 66 years, he fell from a ladder painting his beloved lighthouse and never recovered from his injuries. Georgina was obliged to take Irish Lights to court to receive compensation for his death.





Leonard Victor Stocker



*Polly nee Ryan and Neil Loughrey with four of their children.
(Photo, courtesy Nick Loughrey, taken during their time in Corclough)*

(Below) Mick Bolger and unknown child (photo with many thanks to Patricia Thompson Cooney, Katie McCormack and Patrick Bolger)



Anthony John Kennedy in the 1940s

The 1910s

In a court case in Ballina, the skipper and owner of the Fleetwood steam trawler, *Hebdon*, were accused of fishing inside the limits set by the Department of the Marine. Curragh fishermen from Tipp swore they saw the trawler two miles inside Erris Head and gave evidence as to the colour and number of the vessel. In reply, the crew of the *Hebdon* denied that they passed nearer than ten to fifteen miles off Eagle Island on their way from Greenock to the Fastnet shipping grounds. After a long and amusing case, the justice found in favour of the prosecution and the trawler captain was fined £100.

This was evidently not an isolated incident as in June 1911, a Fisheries by-law was posted by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland (yes, I had to read that twice, too) whereby any steam vessel caught beam trawling, or indeed any kind of trawling, within three miles of Erris Head and Eagle Island would be subject to a fine not exceeding £100.

There was yet another dispute about supplying coal to Eagle Island in the courts in 1914,¹² one which gives us a good representation on how this commodity was transported from Dublin to the western lighthouses and land stations. In the Mayo Assizes, Anthony Dixon of Belmullet was looking for £40 from the Wallace Brothers of Dublin for work done. Dixon was a fisherman and he had entered into a contract with the Wallace Brothers for delivery of coal to lighthouses and lightkeepers' cottages on and off the Erris Coast.

98 tons of coal was to arrive from Dublin via a Wallace Brothers steamer and half would be delivered to Belmullet pier and the other half to Blacksod pier. Anthony Dixon would then unload the coal from the hold. The coal delivered to Belmullet would service the Broadhaven and Eagle Island lighthouses and their dwellings, while the Blacksod consignment was to be delivered to Blacksod, Blackrock and their dwellings. The agreed contract for this was £40.

On this occasion, Dixon contacted Wallace's and advised of the time the steamer should arrive to ensure fast delivery. According to Dixon, this went unheeded and the steamer arrived three days later, when there was insufficient water to land at either pier. After consultation, the coal for Broadhaven was removed directly from the steamer to the lighthouse by Dixon and his men; and the next day, the Eagle Island consignment was likewise removed. The steamer then moved to Blacksod, where it still could not reach the pier, so Dixon and seventeen men accompanied the steamer to Blackrock where that station's coal was removed.

Due to the lightened load, the steamer was able to reach the two piers where the remaining coal was removed by Dixon and his men. When Dixon then asked for his money, Mr. Wallace then said that the contract had not been met, as Dixon had not unloaded all the coal at the piers and he was out of pocket due to the delays and extra deliveries.

The court heard that Dixon had worked for a Mr. Keane who had previously had the coal delivery contract for the lighthouses. He said that, out of the money he was due, he had already paid his men £37 10s for their work and would not have had to pay them so much if the steamer had arrived on the agreed date and discharged the two loads onto the piers.

¹² *Western People* 21st March

For the defence, Mr. Wallace said nothing had been mentioned about the tides when the contract had been signed and he was unfamiliar with the navigable conditions of Blacksod and Broadhaven Bays. The hiring of the steamer was not cheap and, due to all the delays, he was out of pocket by £40 which he was counter-claiming for. Besides which, Dixon had saved himself the expense of hiring a hooker to deliver the coal to the offshore lighthouses, as the steamer had done it for him.

The jury returned a verdict in favour of the plaintiff and Dixon was awarded £40.

The celebrated geologist, Professor John Joly, accompanied the Commissioners of Irish Lights on their annual tour of inspection in 1918. And it was a good thing too, because he later wrote about the visit.

The rumble of the anchor chain brought me on deck in the early dawn of the 12th July, 1918, he wrote. The S.S. Alexandra was just beginning to move.

Our course, leaving this station, (Blacksod) is again westward. But before attaining the distance of Blackrock, we turn northward, and, passing between the mainland and the off-lying islands, we make for Eagle Island.

This island is, on the present occasion, fairly easy of access. It is only a matter of stepping from the stern of the boat just at the moment when it rises to the very summit of the swell. There is an upright rod at the boat's stern to steady the traveller, and as he grasps a rope thrown to him from the shore, assisting himself thereby, stout hands seize him and safety is assured. The lighthouse stands some 200 feet over the sea-level. It is near the edge of the cliff, but in spite of this great elevation, green seas may actually attain its altitude. In 1895, during a storm, a row of lighthouse dwellings and offices were demolished by these tremendous seas. And today, the large blocks of cut granite coping-stones of walls now demolished lie about in every direction. It takes such evidence to render the fact credible. The testimony of the resident keepers is that green seas at times actually break over the lighthouse dwellings and fall into the shelter-yard enclosed by them. The difficulty of explaining so great an elevation of the water remains. The particular slope of the gneissic granite, of which the island is composed, towards the incoming seas is doubtless involved. A careful examination of the conditions would be interesting.

The light is occulting with certain groups of flashes in the minute, and shows red over certain sectors. It would be designated as a group occulting light. The red sectors deal with particular dangers. The burners consist of six concentric wicks of circular form fed by paraffin. This type of burner in Tyndall's day was the best available, and received much praise from the great Irish scientist ("Recent Experiments on Fog Signals," discourse at Royal Institution, 1878), and in its final form was due to Sir James Douglass, of Trinity House, whose brother, Mr. William Douglass, was builder of the Fastnet. Today it is out of date.

I would have liked to linger in this spot for a time longer than our business permitted. The petrological interest of the locality was obviously considerable. The off-lying island and the mainland display the same complex of gneissic granite and parallel interpenetration of basic veins. The latter are often of lustrous black mica separated by layers of white felspar. The folded structure of these veins is often beautifully delicate. We are, of course, now in the region of Dalradian rocks, and such materials extend along the coast for many miles.

A small and very beautiful little bird was handed to me by the principal keeper. It had reached the island that morning pursued by three hawks. The keeper had killed it with a

stick. As none of our party could name it even with the help of Morris's British Birds, which we had in the ship's library we sent it to Professor Patten, of the University of Sheffield, who has for many years studied our Irish birds, residing for that purpose in our lighthouses during certain periods of the year. The bird turned out to be an immature starling. Professor Patten adds that starlings are among the commonest birds at light stations.

Six o'clock that afternoon sees us at Broadhaven Bay, where, after inspecting the small harbour light, we return to our ship for dinner and our evening's rest.

This is the first reference that we have come across to the slope of the gneissic granite being the possible cause of the towering seas that have dogged the lighthouse in her long history. Were the cliffs perpendicular, the waves would probably not be so in your face, so to speak but, as he says, the slope of the cliff must be taken into consideration alongside tides, wind direction and weather.

In 1920, the *General Advertiser for Dublin and All-Ireland* reported on a court case for salvage off the coasts of Mayo and Sligo. The *Annie M. Nadean* had foundered on those coasts towards the end of May 1919 and the ship abandoned. Two ships then arrived and towed her to harbour. The owners and crew of these ships were looking for compensation eleven months later. The court ordered that the weather logs from both Eagle Island and Blackrock lighthouses should be produced as evidence and gave a timeline of ten days for this to happen. There was no mention of a proviso of 'weather permitting.'

The end of the decade saw an incident that could have propelled one of the Eagle Island keepers into the global limelight but didn't.

The race to be the first to fly across the Atlantic – and its prize money of £13,000 – had attracted much interest once the war was over and such adventures were allowed to recommence. In 1919, four planes waited at Newfoundland for a bit of decent weather to take off.

One of these was a Sopwith B1 single-engine plane, piloted by Australian Harry Hawker and navigated by Lt. Cdr Mackenzie Grieve. They were the first away but radiator problems and bad weather stymied their attempt. Eventually, they were forced to ditch in the sea.

The rumour mill worked overtime. They were off the Azores, they were near Castletownbere, they were 40 miles west of Eagle Island. A tug boat was sent to the latter to patrol the waters in between the shipping lanes, hampered greatly by the obligatory storm-force winds and gargantuan seas. Doubtless, the keepers focussed on the western horizon in the hope of spying the small life raft.

After six days, it was obvious that all hope was gone. The King sent a telegram to the wives of the airmen, offering his condolences. Arguments raged over whether Britain had done enough to locate the airmen. The tug boat was stood down.

And then, suddenly, news broke that the duo had been saved. Hawker, knowing they would have to ditch in the ocean, frantically scanned the dark seas for a boat and miraculously found a steamer, the *Mary*, who picked them up. Due to the storm, the *Mary* could only make one knot and it was six days before she reached the north coast of Scotland and Scapa Flow Naval Base could be contacted.

As it happened, rank outsiders Alcock and Brown won the cash a month later when crashing into Derrygimla bog in county Galway, thinking it was a flat field.

World War 1

I respectfully beg to state I have no bicycle – E. Berrells PK

The war on Eagle Island was not really between the British and the Germans but between principal keeper, Edward Berrells, and the Secretary of Irish Lights back in Dublin. To be fair to Berrells, the war brought on unforeseen circumstances and the orders issued by Irish Lights as to what to do in various situations lacked a certain clarity and did not allow for variables like bad weather.

It appears that in November 1914, orders were issued to all lightkeepers that sightings of any suspicious marine craft should be reported to both the nearest Naval Centre and Irish Lights Head Office without delay. Presumably, it did not detail what was regarded as suspicious. If a ship changed course, was that suspicious? If it was a steamer but looked like a submarine, was that suspicious?

And also, *without delay*, while appearing to be pretty watertight, was open to interpretation, particularly if there was a financial price to pay.

And so poor Edward *I respectfully beg to state* Berrells was caught in the cross-fire of suspicious steamers and parsimonious Irish Lights officials.

It seems to have begun post-Christmas in 1914:

*To The Secretary, Irish Lights
29th December 1914*

Sir,

I most respectfully beg to report that I received a signal from the Rock yesterday 28th inst. The flag been up since (28th) Tuesday but owing the state of weather, I could not read semaphore.

Signal received – Suspicious steamer seen off Erris Head at one-twenty on Thursday supposed to be a mine layer.

As this was so delayed, I have not reported by wire to any station.

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

E. Berrells PK, Eagle Island lighthouse

The report evinced a rather cold reply from Head Office

30th December 1914

Principal Keeper,

In reply to your report of the 29th instant regarding suspicious steamer seen off Erris Head, you are to note that the directions contained in the Circular Letters of the 16th and 21st November last are to be strictly adhered to, and no delay must occur between the receiving of a message and informing the nearest Naval Centre, and at the same time this Office Secretary, Irish Lights

One can imagine Eddie reading that reply with a certain indignation. What on earth was the point in reporting that a suspicious vessel passed by five days previously? As it happened, Head Office wired the Naval Base in Buncrana themselves and got the reply that the vessel was believed to be a government vessel.

Oh well, teething problems! A few days later Eddie was respectfully wiring again.

*To: Secretary, Irish Lights
4th January 1915*

Sir,

I most respectfully beg to report that I have this day reported by wire to Naval Central Station Buncrana the following signal from Rock.

A suspicious steamer passed here yesterday 3rd Jan at ten, quite close, fitted with wireless and having two guns mounted on her foredeck. Steamer steered due west from here.

I beg to ask will I forward to office a D3 for car and for wire sent, as I had to employ a car to go send this wire?

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

E. Berrells PK

Eagle Island lighthouse

*To: Secretary, Irish Lights
8th January 1915*

Sir,

I most respectfully beg to report that I early this morning took the following semaphore from Rock and wired same to Naval Central Buncrana.

A steamer passed north yesterday at 10am flying a naval ensign aft and red ensign on the foremast. She is like a submarine.

I beg to forward D3 for car

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

E. Berrells PK

Eagle Island lighthouse

I imagine the guys in Buncrana were scratching their heads at the steamer being like a submarine. Not surprising that Ed found it suspicious.

The Secretary however was less-concerned with submarine-shaped steamers than the shillings and pence. He returned Ed's note, adding, *Furnish D3 for car as requested. Is there not a bicycle at the station to avoid paying car-hire? Return this letter please.*

Ed dutifully returned this note with the immortal words, *I respectfully beg to state I have no bicycle*, prompting an exasperated Secretary to remark, *I am aware the price for market car trip is 5/- but can you not arrange to have a message sent to Belmullet at a cheaper rate? Could you not get a messenger?*

Ed finally agreed to arrange a messenger to do the job for 2/6, though one wonders if said messenger was vetted for German ancestry or sympathies.

The Secretary added a note for the Board to this missive, advising that the 5/- would have to be paid in these two cases as a contract had not been sorted beforehand.

It seems that a signal was hoisted from the lighthouse whenever a message had to be communicated to the mainland. The keeper on shore – it would have been Ed for the first two weeks of 1915 – on seeing the signal, would then receive the message via semaphore from some spot in the lighthouse's field of vision. He would then have to send the message via wire from the post office in Belmullet.

The next communication was a few days later.

*To: Secretary, Irish Lights
14th January 1915*

Sir,

I respectfully beg to say I have reported to Buncrana Naval Centre the following semaphore taken from Rock –

A large steamer painted lead colour passed here at 1.20pm today going into Broadhaven and left again steaming about twenty knots.

I beg to forward D3 for messenger to Belmullet.

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

E. Berrells PK

Eagle Island lighthouse

(I beg to say two of the AKs at Station have bicycles. Would these AKs be allowed mileage?)

Ed was back on the rock on 19th January, but he had obviously trained up AK Neal Loughrey on the wording of his communications with Head Office.

*To: Secretary, Irish Lights
19th January 1915*

Sir,

I respectfully beg to report the following signal from Eagle Island on this date.

A two masted steamer fitted with wireless looks like mine sweeper going west at 12.40pm.

I further beg to state that I have reported same to Naval Centre, Buncrana.

I am Sir your obedient servant,

N. Loughrey AK, Keeper on Shore

Eagle Island Shore Dwellings

Shortly afterwards, John Crowley was on shore leave and he too followed the Berrells' template for communication.

Sir,

In reply to signal from Eagle Island today, I semaphored Rock and was directed to report a large, suspicious steamer two masted, about eight miles west of rock at 2pm on the 13th,

going North very slow and stopping at times. I wired message to Naval Centre Buncrana today.

I respectfully beg to say that this signal was made from Dunamoo Head - modern Dún na mBó - as the PK has ordered us to signal from there in future until further instructions from Office.

I am Sir your obedient servant,

J. Crowley AK, Eagle Island lighthouse

Secretary – if that was his real name – was obviously more concerned with sorting out the financial cost of all these messages. On 22nd January, he wrote: -

With reference to the D3 forms submitted by you in connection with the reporting of suspicious steamers observed passing the Station, I cannot authorize payment of five shillings for special cars on 4th and 8th inst, but am prepared to sanction two shillings and sixpence in each case, being the charge made for messenger on 14th instant: the D3 forms are returned for amendment accordingly.

As bicycles are available at the Station, these messages should in future be taken to the telegraph office by bicycle or messenger on foot, for which a charge of two pence per mile is allowed (there and back)

By Order,

Secretary

Naturally enough, this got Ed's back up as he had already been informed that the Secretary would grudgingly allow the 5/- charge for the car hire. *Sir*, he wrote on 22nd February, when he was back on shore.

In answer to letter received re D3 for car hire on 4th and 8th January, I respectfully ask if I will have to pay out of my own pocket 2/6 for each car other than is allowed in those cases, as I had no instructions in what way to act as to those messages sent re steamers and 5/- always allowed for car hire to contractor.

I beg to forward D3 and letters.

I am Sir your obedient servant,

E. Berrells PK

To be fair, Secretary probably saw the validity of his obedient servant's argument and decided to pen a quick letter to ascertain if the owner of the Market cart would slash his rates.

*To Mr. Anthony Gallagher
Corclough, Belmullet
26th March 1915*

On the 4th and 8th January last, I understand the principal keeper at Eagle Island lighthouse hired your car to take a telegraph message to Belmullet for which you charged 5/- per trip on each occasion. Kindly let me know per return post if you will accept a sum of 2/6 for each trip which is considered a reasonable charge for the service rendered, as it was quite unnecessary to send a market cart when a foot messenger would have sufficed
Secretary, Irish Lights

The return was succinct.

*Sir,
In reply to your letter of 26th inst. I cannot do it less than three shillings.
I am your obedient servant,
Anthony Gallagher*

WW1 started to get serious in February 1915, with the Germans announcing that all the seas around Britain and Ireland were a war zone and subject to attacks from German submarines. Many of these attacks mention Eagle Island but only as a reference point. So, destroyers were sunk *240 miles N.W. of Eagle Island*, a distance which, if calculated in the opposite direction, would be a location in the Irish Sea. There was however one particular incident that happened quite close to the island.

The *Cherbury* – for some reason, it was often referred to as the *Cherburg* – was a Glasgow steamer carrying coal from the Barry Docks in South Wales to *an unknown destination contained in sealed orders*, according to the steward. She was roughly 27 miles WNW of Eagle Island at the end of April, when she spotted German submarine U30 roughly three miles to port and decided to turn and make for land. Captain Davidson ordered all the crew to the engine room to make full speed for the coast. The U-boat fired a couple of torpedoes across her bow and then submerged.



View from the west, looking over Cross Island to the mainland (photo by Joe McCabe)

Fifteen minutes passed and it seemed as if the Germans might have given up the chase but she suddenly resurfaced not fifty yards away from the fleeing boat. Flags were raised from the submarine, requesting the crew to abandon ship as the boat was about to be sunk. Still the captain continued his desperate course towards land but it was soon apparent that the boat, doing a maximum of ten knots, could not hope to outrun a submarine doing at least fifteen. Further shots were fired, striking the boat amidships and the resigned captain ordered the engines to be cut and the lifeboats launched.

There are two conflicting reports about what happened next. One says that the boat was told to approach the submarine, where the ship's papers were requested by the polite and respectful German captain, Erich von Rosenberg-Gruszczyski. Captain Davidson said he had left them on the ship. He was then escorted back to the ship to get the papers. He handed them some unimportant documents and the Germans planted bombs on the ship. They also took some spoons with the name of the ship on them as souvenirs. They then returned to the submarine.

The second version, as told by the steward, had the Germans boarding the boat while the crew were still on board. Some of the Germans covered the crew with pistols while the captain was escorted down to the cabins.

The crew were then told to row like mad for the mainland as the vessel was about to be sunk. Eight minutes later, the submarine fired two torpedoes into the boat and there was a massive explosion, causing the ship to list heavily. Four hours later, she disappeared.

What happened next is best told through the communications from the station to Irish Lights in Dublin. It seems that on the rock at the time were John Crowley AK-in-charge, William Evans AK and Martin McAndrew, temporary keeper. McAndrew, who was one of the boat crew responsible for the tender to the lighthouse, would have been on the rock due to some form of incapacity or family crisis concerning either Ed or AJ Kennedy AK, who were both on shore.

To: Secretary, Irish Lights
30th April 1915

Sir,

I respectfully beg to report that the S.S. Cherbury of Glasgow (Government Transport No. 340) was sunk by a German submarine seven miles North West of Eagle Island at 7.30pm yesterday. The firing being heard from seaward, I kept a sharp look out and observed through the haze a large steamer heading in for the land with a heavy list to port. The weather at this time being very hazy with rain from the s. west, the ship was lost sight of. At 9.30pm, I heard voices calling for help north of the island. I immediately went down with the Morse Lamp and signalled them to steer for the East Landing. Having got the boat's crew of twelve men landed, they informed me that the captain's boat was adrift with thirteen men aboard. I kept flashing the lamp for some time to the north, when I got a reply, the boat being about two miles off and directed them to East Landing. I got them all ashore safely and their lifeboats moored. They left Eagle Island at 4.45am for Scotch Port.

I gave Capt. Davison all the information I could as regards the entrance and passage to Scotch Port.

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

J. Crowley AK, Irish Lights

Eagle Island lighthouse

(Capt. Davidson informed me that he passed two floating mines 25 miles west of Blackrock before meeting with the submarine)

Telegram to Irish Lights

30th April 1915

Capt. Davidson S.S. Cherbury Glasgow torpedoed at 8pm on 29th inst chased by German submarine thirty miles sunk by gunfire torpedo missed Crew landed Eagle Island at midnight arrived shore dwellings 6am this morning Crew lost all effects. E. Berrills

To: Secretary, Irish Lights

1st May 1915

Sir,

I most respectfully beg to report that Captain Davison of S.S. Cherbury arrived at Shore Dwellings this morning at 6am with a crew of officers and men, 25 all told, the ship being sunk by three shrapnel shots, also two torpedoes fired, but missed the ship. There were then three bombs placed on board the ship which sank her. All hands landed on Eagle Island at midnight and remained to daylight, when Temporary Keeper McAndrew piloted the two boats and crew ashore to Scotchport and then to Dwellings. McAndrew at once returned to Rock in a special currach. I beg to say that all the fittings, oars and sails are stored in Scotchport store.

I had a semaphore from Rock this morning. The keepers there claim for saving the crew, also boats.

Kennedy AK and myself had to go to Belmullet, as requested by Master of Ship and were at some expense. I respectfully beg to ask how we are to act in this matter?

And if keepers have permission to salvage boats, a further report will follow, as soon as relief is made on the Rock.

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

E. Berrells PK, Eagle Island lighthouse

Further details of the night in question came to light when the local agent of the *Shipwrecked Fishermen and Mariners' Royal Benevolent Society*, W.G. Murphy, wrote to the secretary of that association, hinting maybe at some recognition for the keepers on the rock.

Belmullet, co. Mayo
8th May 1915

Re: the sinking of the S.S. Cherbury of Glasgow by German submarine

Sir,

The captain and crew of the above vessel all spoke so highly of the behaviour and assistance rendered to them by the lightkeepers on Eagle Island lighthouse that I think the matter is one calling for a special report from me on the subject. The names of the lightkeepers are as follows:

John Crowley, assistant lightkeeper in charge

William Evans, assistant lightkeeper

Martin McAndrew, temporary keeper

The facts are as follows –

At around 7pm on Thursday the 29th April, the lightkeepers heard six shots at sea due west of the island. At 7.30pm they sighted the Cherbury with a list to port. A mist then sprung up and they could not see. At 9.40pm, they heard shouts coming from a boat with twelve men in her asking where they could land. Crowley ordered McAndrew take his place on watch and got blue lights ready and also lit up his Morse Lamp.

By the aid of the lamps and lights, Crowley and Evans directed the boat to the East landing of the Rock. There was a heavy rise and fall of the sea which made it very difficult to get the crew out of the boat but, with the assistance of several coils of rope, Crowley and Evans were able to do it. They then started signalling with lamps and flares and about 10.15pm, the captain's boat, guided by these, got (to) the island.

At the time, the captain's boat was making for Erris Head, which is a wild rocky coast and no landing place and the chances are they would have been lost. By the aid of ropes as before, they were all safely landed on the island and their wants attended to by the lightkeepers in the way of food, for which they do not propose to make any charge. One of the keepers gave his overcoat to one of the sailors who was half-clothed and wet and cold. After a few hours, they got the boats safely moored and then gave up their beds to the crew who had to stay on the rock that night. At 4.30am on the 30th April, McAndrew, the temporary keeper, went with them to Scotchport, as the place is not very safe without a man who knows the way and they were safely landed there.

The expressions of Captain Davidson and the crew were all of gratitude for the actions of the keepers. As they said, without their aid, they would be lost. Something ought to be done to put the men's conduct on record with their authorities, apart from considering the question of a reward.

*I am yours f-fully,
W.G. Murphy*

To: Secretary Irish Lights
10th May 1915

Re: S.S. Cherbury

Sir,

I have received the enclosed report from this society's Hon. Agent at Belmullet, co. Mayo, Mr. W.G. Murphy, about the action of the lightkeepers at Eagle Island lighthouse, which appears to have been in every way commendable and reflects great credit on their feelings of humanity. I am asking our Hon. Agent to express to the men our Committee's appreciation of their conduct, and possibly your Commissioners may be disposed to take notice of the matter in a way which will be a source of gratification to the three men whose names are mentioned in the report.

I am Sir your obedient servant,

E.E. Maude, Secretary,

The Shipwrecked Fishermen and Mariners' Royal Benevolent Society

Hmm. I bet, like me, you were wondering what form of gratification was forthcoming from the Board. A medal, maybe? A commendation? Perhaps a framed certificate to hang on the lighthouse wall? Naturally though, the Board had to get their Inspector, Captain Reginald Deane, to, well, inspect the circumstances of the matter.

To the Secretary Irish Lights
16th August 1915

Sir,

In compliance with the Board's Order of the 7th May last, I have the honour to report that, having enquired fully into this matter, I find that the lightkeepers forming the regular staff at Eagle Island Lighthouse have not made any claim for assistance rendered on the occasion of the landing at the Lighthouse of the crew of the "S.S. Cherbury," which was sunk by a German submarine on the 29th April.

*There was however a temporary keeper named **Martin McAndrew** at the lighthouse at the time and this man has applied to be remunerated for the services he rendered to the crew in distress, and for subsequently piloting their boats to the mainland.*

This application I do not consider is one which the Commissioners should deal with, and I would beg to suggest that McAndrew be referred to the Shipwrecked Mariners Society, who have a local representative in the neighbourhood.

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

R. Deane, Inspector Irish Lights

It appears that poor Martin McAndrew, earning a fraction of the other men, was being subtly sidelined for daring to ask for compensation for loss of food and possibly an overcoat, which he could ill afford. If the lightkeeper was the servant of the Board, the temp was the servant of the servant and not the Board's responsibility. The Secretary, on the Board's instructions, accordingly sent out the letter putting the matter to rest.

*To the Keeper in Charge,
Eagle Island lighthouse
23rd August 1915*

With reference to your report of the 1st May 1915, on the subject of the sinking of the S.S. Cherbury by an enemy submarine, I have to inform you that the Board have noted with approval the steps taken by the Eagle Island lightkeepers to render assistance to the crew of this vessel.

*As regards the claim made by the temporary keeper, Martin McAndrew, for remuneration for services rendered in this matter, I am to state that the application is not one with which the Commissioners can deal, and you are instructed to refer McAndrew to the Shipwrecked Mariners Society, who are stated to have a local representative in the neighbourhood.
Secretary, Irish Lights*

One can only imagine Crowley and Evans hugging each other, ecstatic at winning the Board's approval for their actions. Gratification indeed.

In the meantime, the action around the lighthouse continued and the keepers had front row seats: -

*To: Secretary, Irish Lights
3rd May 1915*

Sir,

I respectfully beg to report that a submarine attacked a large steamer yesterday at 9.30am about 20 miles North West of Eagle Island and fired several times on her. The steamer steered first for the land and then right off to sea. Apparently, she got out of range as I heard no further reports of firing. I immediately hoist the signal to communicate with the shore and had message semaphored. At 1.30, the Patrol Boat Greckel hove in sight. I hoist the signal (L.G.F.) that I wished to communicate with him. He bore down on us and came under the lee of the island. I semaphored all particulars to him for which he thanked me very much.

This attack was made in about the same direction as the S.S. Cherbury was sunk on the 29th April.

I am Sir your obedient servant,

J. Crowley AK, Eagle Island lighthouse

*To: Secretary, Irish Lights
24th May 1915*

Sir,

I respectfully beg to report that I received the following message from Eagle Island.

Steamer off Inniskea fired at by submarine, east of island, apparently sunk.

Ten shots fired.

*I further beg to state that I reported same by wire to Naval Centre, Buncrana
I am Sir your obedient servant,
N. Loughrey AK, Keeper on shore
Eagle Island lighthouse*

*To the Secretary, Irish Lights
1st June 1915*

*Sir,
I respectfully beg to report that I received the following semaphore from Eagle Island today
– “A large suspicious looking liner going west at 3pm. Apparently a troop ship.” I further
beg to state that I reported same by wire to Naval Centre, Buncrana.
I am Sir your obedient
N. Loughrey AK, Keeper on shore
Eagle Island lighthouse*

*To Lightkeeper Eagle Island
2nd June 1915*

*Referring your message yesterday.
Liner, what was appearance, position, size and any other details as to masts, funnels and
colour?
Naval Centre, Buncrana*

*To the Secretary, Irish Lights
3rd June 1915*

*Sir,
I respectfully beg to report that I received the enclosed message from the Naval Centre at
Buncrana at 12.15am. I went to semaphore ground at 6am and got the following reply.
Liner passed 20 miles off, about 18,000 tons, two masts and one funnel. Could not
distinguish colour.
I am Sir your obedient
N. Loughrey AK, Keeper on shore
Eagle Island lighthouse*

The following month, it was reported in the *Irish Independent* that a steamer had been torpedoed between Eagle and Inniskea Islands, twelve missiles striking the unnamed ship. Boats were seen coming ashore. It was also reported that the submarine involved had been rammed.

Two days later, the same paper retracted the story saying no steamer had been sunk and no submarine rammed. But, in the situation prevalent, who would know?

At the beginning of June, much to Ed's consternation, there was a much more sinister development to be reported.

To the Secretary, Irish Lights

2nd June 1915

Sir,

I most respectfully beg to report that a Coastguard has arrived in Gladree and taken on four men to act as lookout or coast-watchers and are stationed on Donamoo Head, direct inshore of Eagle Island, distance about a mile.

I beg to ask will this make any change in our usual way of reporting suspicious ships passing the station during the war?

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

E. Berrels PK

Eagle Island lighthouse

The District Captain of the Coastguards in Kingstown, a seemingly helpful sort called E.J. Barton, was keen to know how the keepers on Eagle Island transmitted their reports of suspicious activity, and could his chaps help in any way? He therefore wrote to Edward "Don't tell him" Pike, acting C.O. at nearby Elly Bay to find out. Pike replied: -

Previous arrangement – one of the keepers onshore would visit Doonamo Head during the day and hoist a flag at a small flagstaff and send or receive semaphore signal.

Present arrangement – The Coastguard Rating or one of the Coastwatchers who is able to read semaphore, would receive the message from Eagle Island, when the 4th man is detailed for patrolling, would proceed to Belmullet with a telegram if required, thus saving any additional expense and no delay. I provided the coastguard rating with a pad of telegraph forms for this purpose. Any information received from the lighthouse will be telegraphed as soon as possible to W.S.S. Blacksod.

This was forwarded to Irish Lights and the Secretary, who had doubtless learned the value of precise instructions, was quick to put Ed in the picture, as well as reminding him of the importance of not engaging a horse and cart on lighthouse business.

12th June 1915

Keeper in Charge,

In reply to your letter of the 2nd instant, enquiring whether the establishment of a Coastguard Look-out Station on Doonamo Head will make any difference in the method of reporting suspicious ships passing the Station, I have to inform you that arrangements have been made for the Coastguards to receive and dispatch any such messages and render any further assistance which may be required.

This applies only to reports concerning the war; telegrams on Service business are to be forwarded, as heretofore, by messenger on bicycle whenever possible, rather than by horse and car.

Secretary, Irish Lights

By March 1917, German submarine sightings were ten-a-penny on Eagle Island. Ed was having the time of his life.

To Secretary, Irish Lights
10th March 1917

Sir,

I most respectfully beg to report that on the 7th, a submarine was sighted about 10 miles North East off Eagle Island. She was steering South West when abeam of rock. She would be about eight miles off. We had her under observation from 4pm to 5.30pm and, when lost sight of, she was going same course. I signalled two patrol steamers and informed them by flags and semaphore. They thanked me and went west after the submarine.

I also beg to state, after arriving at Shore Dwelling on Relief on the morning of the 8th, I observed a submarine going west about 4 miles off Scotchport. I reported this by wire to the officer Ellie Bay Coastguard Station.

I am Sir, your obedient servant,

E. Berrells PK, Eagle Island lighthouse

It may have been one of those submarines spotted by Ed that did for the barque *Arethusa* that month. She was on a trip from Gulfport (probably the Florida one) to the Clyde with a cargo of pitch pine when she was sunk by *U-boat* 66 off the Mayo coast. According to the *Arethusa's* captain, A.A. Findlay, she was between eight and ten miles from Eagle Island and the lightkeepers and the coastguards had a full view of the sinking. Captain Findlay turned author twelve years later and recounted the events in *Sea Breezes*.

At daybreak on the morning of 23rd April – St. George's Day – we sighted Eagle Island right ahead, he wrote. The Admiralty instruction given us before sailing had been to get, if possible, into the latitude of Tory Island before making land. We were in a fair way to do so when the wind dropped to light westerly airs. The courses had been reefed and the boats swung out in the davits in readiness for an emergency. Throughout the morning, all hands were on the look-out. I went up the crosstrees and spent all the forenoon there, spying out the land and incidentally seeing in every ripple on the long, oil, westerly swell, the track of a periscope. I had just come down to dinner when a small steamer was reported on our port quarter. I gave orders to hoist the Ensign to let her know we were an English ship. As the flag fluttered out at the peak, I heard the sound of a report and rushed up on deck as another crash woke the echoes.

"What's that?" I asked.

The second mate, who was on duty, replied he thought it was a destroyer firing at a submarine somewhere in the vicinity.

There was the thud of another shell and I realised the situation in a flash. It was a submarine firing at us. And she had just about got the range too.

"Tumble into the starboard lifeboat," I ordered. (Really?) Shouting to the second mate to let me know when all was ready, I rushed down below. I had hardly time to grab my valise

and cram the ship's papers etc into it when through the porthole came the cry, "All ready, sir!"

As I mounted the rail – "Are we all here?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Catch these!" and I slid down the falls and the men shoved off.

The shots from our unseen enemy were coming thick and fast as we pulled away from the ship's side. One brought the main topsail yard down with a run, another hit her in the waist, a third raised a cascade of water under the bows. Then two or three crashed in between the davits, in the very place we had been standing a couple of minutes before. At every shot we thought the boat would be hit.

We had got about ten or twelve yards from the ship, the shells coming clean over our heads, so that we could feel the wind of them and some water being splashed in the boat.

At this moment, somebody gave a shout. We turned to look and there was our old French sailmaker, standing on the top-gallant rail of the barque, dressed in his shore-going beret (and, hopefully, other attire too).

The air turned red and blue with curses as we turned and pulled back to the ship. The cook, a brawny Irishman, lost his nerves and howled to the oarsmen to keep on.

"Drag him down in the bottom and sit on him," I shouted.

'A couple of the hands took the hint. I pointed out to the men that, as the shots were then falling, it was probably the best thing we could do, and afterwards it was agreed that pulling back to the ship saved us. We rescued 'Sails' and then began to pull in the direction of the shore, keeping the ship between ourselves and the submarine.

Altogether he must have fired 25 to 30 shots. A few minutes afterwards we saw the hull of the brute appear round the barque's quarter and sheer in alongside. There he remained for a few minutes, then he laid off some distance and we saw and heard two or three explosions. Following them, we saw the good old ship slowly settle down to starboard. She settled and disappeared, with all sails set...

We were six hours in the boats when three armed trawlers came out of Broadhaven Sound, picked us up and landed us at Killybegs.

On the 25th April, the Glenesk, a Norwegian sailing vessel of 1369 tons was sunk by the German submarine U-81 when 75 miles W.N.W. of Eagle Island. The sixteen men took to the two lifeboats and made for the coast. They arrived at Eagle Island where only Neil Loughrey and a supernumerary, T. Colfer, were on duty.

*To Secretary, Irish Lights
April 26th 1917*

Sir,

I respectfully beg to report that, at 7.30am this morning, we sighted four ship's boats under sail about eight miles north west of the rock, steering for the land. We at once hoisted signal for Coastguard Doonamoo Head. When about four miles off, two of the boats changed their course and made for Broadhaven, the other two boats still making for the rock. We waved flags and directed them into East landing. Arriving at landing, the Captain asked, could we

*give him a man to direct them to the nearest landing place and, as T. Colfer, Supy. Keeper, was on Rock, I left him in my place. I got into one of the boats and brought them to Scotchport. Leaving them at Shore Dwellings, I went back to Rock in a curragh. Their ship, the sailing ship "Glenesk" of Bergen, outward bound in ballast from Greenock to New York, crew of 16 hands all saved. They were sunk by a German submarine 90 miles W.N.W. of Eagle Island at 12 noon on 25th inst. The other two boats belonged to a sailing ship about their own size, homeward bound loaded but they could not say what her name was. Both ships were sunk about the same time. Trusting my action in this matter will meet with your approval. I am, Sir, your obedient servant
N. Loughrey AK, Eagle Island lighthouse*

Ed was obviously a little concerned about the reaction of Head Office to this and with good reason. Technically, Loughrey had left his post, leaving the light in the charge of a supernumerary. If the weather had turned, Mr. Colfer – a well-known maritime name in Wexford – could have been alone on the rock for weeks.

*To Secretary, Irish Lights
27th April 1917*

N. Loughrey re. piloting Ship's Crew on shore at request of Captain Johnston
Sir,
*I most respectfully beg to say, as N. Loughrey AK came on shore yesterday to pilot the crew of the Norwegian barque, Glenesk of Bergen, at the request of the captain, I respectfully beg to state that N. Loughrey was put on rock again by Anthony Gallagher, who I directed to apply to Mrs. Murphy, Belmullet, her being the agent for all those cases of ships' crews. I beg to state there were three ships' and one steamer's crews in Belmullet, all sunk off Eagle Island on 25th. I am Sir, your most obedient servant,
E. Berrells PK, Eagle Island lighthouse*

Seemingly though the Board seemed to have adopted the sensible view that the strange times called for a bit of understanding.

Not unsurprisingly, the *Laird Line*, who had been providing a service from Glasgow to the west coast of Ireland were reluctant to endanger their crew during this time. In a letter dated 17th July 1917, the company advised the Director of Cross-Channel Transportation that, *although a service has been given between Glasgow and Westport, the tonnage has been very small, and the Company has no steamer available to resume sailings between Liverpool and Westport. Moreover, you will notice that the firm refer to the dangers of sending a ship in the neighbourhood of Eagle Island.*

Ten crew members were killed on September 6th 1917 when a British steamer was blown up by a mine laid by a German submarine three miles west of Eagle Island. The SS *Tuskar* was on her way from Glasgow to Limerick with a general cargo when the tragedy occurred.

The officers and some of the crew survived but ten Scottish and Irish sailors working in the engine room lost their lives.

A wreath was laid at Scotchport in 2017 to commemorate the ten who died. Their names, which are inscribed on the Tower Hill memorial in London, were:-
Thomas Finlay, donkeyman, aged 55, from north Lanarkshire
James Hopkins, cook, no age given, from Portrush
James Houston, second engineer, aged 24, from Ayrshire
Gilbert Killen, cabin boy, aged 15, from Glasgow
James Mayberry, fireman, aged 28, from Portrush
Neil McClean, able seaman, aged 39, from Islay
Henry McGowan, fireman, aged 46, from Glasgow
Alexander Montgomery, fireman, aged 67, from Derry
Robert Reid, chief engineer, aged 42, from Glasgow
James Tinney, craneman, 41, from Donegal



*SS Tuskar from the
Poole collection,
National Library of
Ireland*

It would be remiss not to mention the exhaustive efforts of PK Lenny Stocker to get himself a medal for his rescue of the survivors of *H.M.S. Paxton* who managed to make Blackrock lighthouse in May 1917. Lenny had been the PK at Blackrock (Mayo) at the time of the incident but had replaced the indefatigable Edward Berrells at Eagle Island between Christmas 1917 and February 1918.

Many of the 22 men who landed on Lenny's doorstep had been in a bad way. Not only had the PK helped them ashore but he had also helped to nurse them back to health. In fact, he had already expended a lot of energy during 1917 in ensuring that he was

recompensed for the food he had provided for the men. This accomplished, his thoughts now turned to loftier things.

*To Secretary, Irish Lights
15th August,*

I most respectfully beg to state I have been advised by several Naval officials to forward an application with a view to being awarded a medal for the saving of part of the crew of HMS Paxton at Blackrock Mayo in May 1917, on which occasion I ran the risk of my life and successfully saved the boat's crew. Lieutenant Roberts R.N.R. of the above ship would have applied for a medal for me but he states the proper course is through the Commissioners of Irish Lights. Also, he states his address is Trem y Don, North Wales, should any information be required. He also states that on the occasion, he made a full report of the matter and thought something had been done before now. Also, the crew of the boat were anxious that I should receive a medal and the ship's doctor.

The Divisional Office of C.G. at Elly Bay informs me that the proper course to take is through the Commissioners.

Thanking you in anticipation, I am sir your obedient servant.

L. Stocker PK, Eagle Island lighthouse

*To L. Stocker PK,
Sept 3rd 1918*

Your letter 15th ult., claiming medal for services rendered to ship-wrecked crew of H.M.S. Paxton.

*It is proposed to communicate with Lieut. Roberts but the address you gave is insufficient, there being no such Post Office as Trym y Don. If you know his full address, furnish it please.
Secretary, Irish Lights*

*To Secretary, Irish Lights
4th September 1918,*

I respectfully beg to reply to your letter of the 3rd instant. Lieutenant Roberts' address is Portmadoc. I attach hereto his address given to me written by himself before leaving Blackrock. But I beg to explain this is his home address. I am not aware of his official address but I have replied to several of his letters with the enclosed address.

I am sir your obedient servant.

L. Stocker PK

To: Lieut. R. Roberts

I am directed by the Commissioner of Irish Lights to transmit for your information copy of a letter received from L. Stocker PK, Eagle Island, with reference to services rendered by him to the survivors of the crew of H.M.S. Paxton, while at Blackrock, Mayo in May 1917.

Before taking any action in the matter, the Commissioners would be glad to learn whether, in your opinion, the action taken by this keeper is deserving of the recognition he desires, and I am also to request that they may be favoured with information as to the usual procedure in this case, and whether a medal is applicable thereto.

*I am Sir, your obedient servant,
Secretary, Irish Lights*

Sirs,

My son, Lieutenant R. Roberts R.N.R., last June went out to Halifax as Convoy Officer. I readdressed your letter of the 7th ultimo to him. Since then, he has been shifted to Quebec, so it will be some time before you can expect a reply

*Yours faithfully,
Gwenddydd Roberts
Portmadoe,
October 24th 1918*

*To: Lieut. R. Roberts
Trym-y-don,
Portmadoe,
21st March 1919*

Dear Sir,

I again beg to refer to my letters of the 7th September and 22nd October 1918, asking for your observations on an application received from L. Stocker PK, regarding services rendered to the survivors of the crew of H.M.S. Paxton while he was stationed at Blackrock (Mayo) Lighthouse and to enquire if you are yet in a position to favour me with a reply thereto.

*Yours faithfully,
Secretary, Irish Lights*

*To Secretary, Irish Lights
28th March 1919,*

Sir,

I respectfully beg to state I have had communication from Lieutenant R. Roberts R.N. He states that his mother posted a letter to him apparently from the Irish Lights Office. He was then Convoy Officer in Canada and the letter referred to was not received by him. That would be about last October. He would be thankful if a copy of the above-mentioned letter would now be forwarded to him as he is now at home in hospital. I enclose his address herewith.

*I am sir your obedient servant.
L. Stocker PK*

One starts to detect a determination on Lenny's part to see this through to the bitter end. A lot of people, I am sure, would have given it up a long time ago but Lenny's desire to see his contribution to the war effort rewarded ensured that the matter was not so easily laid to rest. Still, Secretary got in touch with the errant lieutenant up in Scotland: -

*To Lieut R. Roberts R.N.R,
RN Aux Hospital, Peebles
2nd April 1919*

Dear Sir,

I enclose herewith copy of a communication addressed to you on the 7th September last with reference to service rendered by L. Stocker PK to the survivors of HMS Paxton in May 1917, as it is understood that the original letter has not reached you.

Yours faithfully,

Secretary, Irish Lights

*To the Secretary, Irish Lights
April 9th 1919*

Dear Sir,

Your letter of the 2nd inst to hand, with a copy of letters with a copy of letters written on 15th August and 7th September 1918 respectively and note contents of L. Stocker's letter.

Personally, I do not think there was any great risk of life attached to our landing on Blackrock, but on the other hand, medals have been awarded for much less risk.

PK L. Stocker and his two assistants rendered us a very great service in supplying us with food when we were on the brink of starvation; also their promptness in communicating with the mainland and obtaining assistance, and for this I think he ought to be compensated.

As for the procedure in such cases, I am sorry I do not know.

I am, sir, yours obediently,

R. Roberts

To PK Eagle Island

I have to inform you that the Commissioners, having carefully gone into your claim for a medal in respect of service rendered by you to survivors of the crew of HMS Paxton who landed at Blackrock (Mayo) in May 1917, while they appreciate your actions on that occasion, do not feel they can approach the Admiralty on the subject as you suggest.

By order,

Secretary, Irish Lights

Moving station

This article – entitled *Old Time Packing Up* – appeared in *Beam 12.1* in 1981 and was written by Mrs. Mary O'Connor, who was evidently a lightkeeper's daughter around the time of the Troubles. Although it is not specific to Eagle Island and has been slightly abridged, it is included to give a flavour of family life when the order arrived ...

It all began with the principal keeper arriving on our doorstep and in his hand an official envelope, the contents of which he already knew, it being his duty to open all official correspondence.

On his announcement of "It's your orders," my father's first conscious question was "Where to?" Should it be to some outlandish rock (or should I say, relieving station) a drop of the Moonshine was produced to revive him. And should the answer be favourable, the same procedure was gone through just to celebrate. After the last sips of Mountain Dew, the mammoth task of carrying in boxes had to be considered.

Usually, a time lapse of three weeks was allowed before one's final orders were received – these arriving a couple of days before leaving for our new destination. Now, all dwelling houses were furnished to the extent of beds, wardrobes, chairs, tables etc. Anything such as carpets, three-piece suites, pianos and sundry items such as delph, pictures etc. were the responsibility of the keepers. This meant that all Commissioners' property had to be left behind and only one's own possessions accompanied those fortunate enough to own them.

Sometimes I believe there must have been competitions between keepers as to who could make the biggest box. Some of ours were easily 6ft. long x 4ft. wide x 4ft. deep. Perhaps I exaggerate a little as everything seems so big when one is small. It took 2-3 people to carry them into the house when empty, so their weight when full must have caused considerable burst blood vessels among the railway porters. How they were able to be pushed into the guard's van remains a mystery and what a nightmare it must have been to boatmen who had to, on some occasions, transport them to an island.

After being aired, the boxes were firstly lined with newspapers and then something soft to avoid breakages in transit.

Coming home from school, all that could be seen of mother were ankles, the rest of her being buried 4ft. deep and speaking to us in a voice that sounded like a muffled foghorn. We had, in chain-like fashion, to pass her the delph and ornaments. The quicker she got them packed, the more she emerged and when the feet attached to those ankles reached the floor, what a sigh of satisfaction at a job well done. Come to think of it, as soon as those ankles disappeared, so did Dad, whose interest in the packing seemed to wane. However, when each box was filled to capacity, his turn came. All boxes had to have lids screwed down. Incidentally, some of the lids of the boxes were hinged and, if not careful, one could end up with the same fate as Marie Antoinette. Then they had to be numbered and a list of contents written down, as in the days I am writing about, there were troubles in Ireland. So huge were these boxes that rollers had to be put under them to help them on their way. When it was the piano's turn to roll its way to the landing, I swear that for one moment

mother stood still and mentally said, "I name this ship so and so and may God bless all who sail in her."

The picture crates were lathed and made excellent material for playing zoos and were almost equal size as the boxes. So was the picture of the 'Mauritania,' which always hung above our kitchen mantelpiece. It always annoyed dad, as the smoke from the funnel went one direction and the wash of the sea the opposite. Perhaps it sensed dad's resentment, as it fell off the wall in the middle of the night and, as some sinking ships sometimes drag their crew with them, dragged the clock plus numerous ornaments with it as it sailed its final voyage to the floor.

With everything despatched and only personal luggage left, the cleaning up began. Walls and windows were washed, the floors being left to last.

As the morning of departure came, we were all called at a very early hour so that the equally enormous bed-bags were produced. First, the mattress rolled and tied with hemp were eased in and then, in seaman-like fashion, the rope removed and the mattress eased slowly to make a hold like an unfilled Swiss-roll. This hold made room for blankets, change of garments, cups and saucers etc to do us on the day of our arrival at the new station. Last item to be packed was the chamber pot and, believe me, with mum's expertise, could nearly hold as much as the bed bags! Items such as shaving gear, towels, face-flannels, soap etc. I could almost swear that the chamber pot held up on a certain TV show as the one used by Napoleon, was really the one we threw in off Inishowen Head.

Then sadly, came the last look around at what had been our home for a possible 2-3 years, and also the tearful goodbyes to neighbours and friends and our journey into another unknown had begun. Only to be repeated after another short period of time.



The West station 2022. The wall afforded some protection coming up from the South landing (photo by Fergus Sweeney)

The 1920s

...a dangerous big rock off the coast of Mayo ...

Stormy Seas

Captain Thomas Jones and the eight-strong crew of the *Algore* which beached off Dunfanaghy on Thursday arrived safely in Letterkenny. The steamer, which was bound from Liscannor to Belfast with a cargo of flagstones, fared well until Eagle Island was reached, at which point very heavy seas were encountered. The stokehold plates were soon underwater and the suction pumps were found to be choked, so Captain Jones decided to try and run the ship to Dunfanaghy in order to save the cargo. By the time they reached Sheephaven Bay, the stokehold plates were six inches under water and subsequent northerly gales made him decide to send the crew ashore in the lifeboat. By this time, water had doused the engine room fires.

Soon after she was abandoned, the bridge was torn asunder and the hatches were smashed. Captain Jones had been three times shipwrecked and twice torpedoed, which makes one wonder how he managed to find a crew to serve under him – *Western Morning News*, Saturday 12th September 1925.

The Swansea steam trawler, *Kilgerran Castle*, put into Galway on Saturday with defective pumps. Captain Bachelor had phoned from off Eagle Island to say that he was in trouble and he was instructed to head to Galway for repairs. The captain was the sole survivor of the *Cardigan Castle* which had been lost off the Mayo coast in 1926 and also master of the *Caerphilly Castle* which sank off Slyne Head last December – *Connacht Sentinel*, Tuesday 27th August 1929

Conor O'Brien (the missing apostrophe was deliberate) was one of the foremost seamen of his day. A grandson of William Smith O'Brien of Young Ireland and 1848 fame, Conor was a big player in the 1914 Howth gun-running saga and the stories of his journeys aboard his three yachts – *Kelpie*, *Saoirse* and *Ilen* – including his epic round-the-world voyage, make for thrilling reading. Having encountered mountainous seas in the notorious Southern Ocean, he plays them down in favour of one storm he survived off Eagle Island in the early 1920s.

It is difficult to estimate the size of a sea, he states, but if this was not the biggest I ever met, it must have been mighty near it. The spray of the breakers was going over Eagle Island and that is 160 feet high. Three years later, I saw, in the South Indian Ocean, a sea which I classed as phenomenal, and my impression was that it would have looked big among the common stuff that was going this day, but nothing bigger than the one phenomenal sea of this day.

I think they both exceeded 30 feet, but only momentarily; since, being caused by the superimposition of two sets of waves, they were quite unstable. It felt for all the world like being kicked down several flights of stairs. She (Kelpie) got out of it with about six feet of her bulwarks burst out and, as I discovered when, later on, I had the opportunity of investigating the bad leak which plagued us henceforth, as much of her garboard strake started from the keel.

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
John J Sweeny	1919-23		Benjamin Godkin	1917-23
Michael Woods	1923-26		Charles Loughrey	1918-23
Richard O'Donnell	1926-28		William Wall	1918-23
Alexander McQuaig	1928-29		Daniel O'Donnell	1923-25
Thomas Byrne	1929-31		Laurence Power	1923-26
			Patrick Boyle	1923-25
			William A Hamilton	1925-28
			John Lavelle	1925-32
			Dominick O'Donnell	1926
			James O'Connor	1929-31
			Joseph McGowan	1929-33

Hard on the heels of John Sweeny came **Michael Woods (152)** who was PK at the station between 1923 and 1926. Born in Dublin in 1873, he joined the crew of the *Princess Alexandra* as a cabin boy when he was fifteen years old. The *Princess Alexandra* was the primary tender for Irish Lights and was used for annual inspections and ceremonial occasions as much as for delivering cargo.

After ten years as boy and able seaman, during which time he married local girl, Mary Byrne, he joined the lighthouse service as a supernumerary keeper in October 1898. Six months later he was assistant keeper and in 1922 was made principal keeper at St. John's Point, county Down. Arriving on the Mullet with his wife and seven children in 1923, he was well used to the island life, having served at Tory Island, Tearaght, Arranmore Island, The Maidens and Mew Island. He retired from Haulbowline in 1933 and died at his home in Beaumont in his native Dublin in 1947.

Richard Joseph O'Donnell (286) succeeded Michael Woods in 1926 and served on the island until 1928. He was on his second time around in Corclough, having been assistant keeper here between 1905 and 1910, during which time he had married Ellen, daughter of Anthony Gallagher, who had the Scotchport tender. While in Mayo, the first time around, the couple had three children, the eldest of whom was called Mary. During Richard's second spell as principal keeper, Mary married Assistant Keeper William Hamilton in Binghamstown Church. The *Western People* of March 3rd 1928 reported most prosaically that *"the happy couple left for Dublin where the honeymoon will be spent. A visit will be paid to Mr and Mrs John O'Donnell, Portaferry, county Down, grandparents of the bride and thence to old Donegal, where a few weeks will be spent by the heathery braes and silver strands of Killybegs."* (A few weeks? What kind of matrimonial leave did lightkeepers get?) Mary O'Donnell / Hamilton, incidentally, passed away in 2011, a few weeks short of her 104th birthday.

This spell at Eagle was Richard's first station as principal keeper. He retired from Balbriggan in 1940.

Alexander McQuaig (189) arrived on Eagle on 1st August 1928 on his promotion to principal keeper after 26 years of service. Born in 1881 on Rathlin Island to a farmer, James, the surname has been transcribed in the civil records as 'McConig,' to add to the 2,000 other variations of the name. He was actually stationed on Rathlin in 1911 as a 29-year-old, unmarried assistant keeper, accompanied by his sister, Mary Jane. He was 40 years old when he married Esther Carolan in Dublin in 1921 and they had three children. He was transferred to Fanad on 31st August 1929 and retired from Drogheda East/West in 1941.

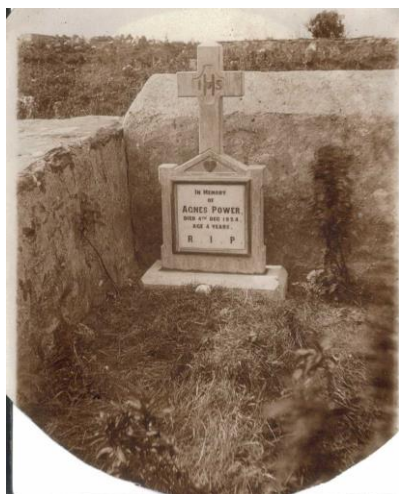
Rounding off the 1920s came Principal Keeper **Thomas Joseph Byrne (159)**, another returnee. With Richard O'Donnell (above) he had served as assistant keeper on the island from 1905 to 1910 and was back, older and wiser and with a larger entourage. He had been promoted to PK while at Blackrock, Mayo in 1923. He joined Eagle Island on 21st August 1929 and joined his next station, Dundalk, on 9th July 1931. Five years later he retired to Balbriggan and died in England in 1957 aged 80.

Turning to the assistant keepers, we find **Daniel O'Donnell (230)** tending the lamp between 1923 and 1925, which proves he's been around even longer than we had imagined. Born in Kilronan, Inis Mór in 1888, when his father, John, was keeper at Eeragh, he was a younger brother of Richard Joseph O'Donnell (above). Tantalisingly, there seems to be some sort of romantic intrigue story on the Mullet here, for in 1926, Daniel who, the year previously, had moved from Eagle Island to Tory Island, married one Nora Sweeney, 19-year-old daughter of Blacksod shopkeeper, Thomas Sweeney. In Dublin.

Daniel later became principal keeper at Slyne Head and retired from the service in 1948. Daniel and Nora passed away in Dublin in 1979 and 1980 respectively.

Laurence F. Power (232) was active on Eagle Island from 1923 to 1926. A native of The Ring near Dungarvan, a predominately Gaelic speaking area, his father was a carpenter and doesn't appear to have any familial connections with the Alex Power who served at Eagle Island in the 1860s. He joined Irish Lights in May 1908 and three months later was made an assistant keeper. While serving at his first station (Tuskar Rock) he married Mary Teresa Carey with whom he had six children.

One of the girls, Agnes, who had been born at Ballycotton in January 1921, was one of the youngest when she arrived on the Mullet in August 1923. The family story is that she died on Eagle Island on 4th December 1924, presumably on a trip to see her father, aged three years eleven months. She was buried in Termoncarragh graveyard, where many



graves are surrounded by walls to keep out the strong winds. The lettering (*left*) is now very worn.

The family left Eagle Island and their daughter behind on 12th September 1926. Laurence retired from Haulbowline in 1940 and died in Dundalk in 1970 aged 87.

Patrick Francis Boyle (297) was on Eagle Island during the same period as wee Daniel above (1923 to 1925) A native of beautiful Malinmore in co. Donegal, neither of his parents seem to have had any connection with the lighthouses. According to grand-nephew, Phil Boyle, he trained as a joiner, like his father, and was

one of the 300 Catholics taken on to build a little boat called the Titanic.

Before the war, he was a member of the St. Columba's Fife and Drum band in Glencolumkille, along with his brother John James and a young John McShane, who both also became lightkeepers. John McShane died in the flu epidemic of 1918.

Patrick joined Irish Lights after WW1, after being on the waiting list for five years and must have left between 1925 and 1930. Again, according to family lore, he broke his back in a fall while painting but whether it was work-related is unknown. He returned to Malinmore and took up farming the family land. He passed away in 1962.

William Alexander Hamilton (311), born in 1897, was on Eagle between 1925 and 1928. As we have seen, his greatest achievement was marrying the eldest daughter of the PK Richard O'Donnell and then enjoying the mother of all honeymoons. He had served three years in the Royal Navy in the Great War prior to joining Irish Lights and Eagle Island was his first station.

Apparently, there were two William Hamiltons serving in Irish Lights at the same time. Some bright spark decided to station them together at Tory Island some years later. One was a protestant (actually an episcopalian) and the other a catholic and the islanders used to call them Willy the Gaul and Willie the Gael.

In actual fact, they both were Catholics! For on the morning of his marriage to Mary O'Donnell, William was formerly received into the Roman Catholic church in Binghamstown, according to the *Western People* of 3rd March 1928. Evidently, this was purely a conversion of convenience and shows that true love really does conquer all.

Two of William's children, Reggie and Ronnie also became lightkeepers and a grandson, John, too. William was the last keeper on Rotten Island in 1959 and he became attendant there on his retirement. It is said that Irish Lights extended the angle of light from the lighthouse so that William could see it from his house! He retired there, on his home turf, until his death in 1976.

John 'Jack' Lavelle (315) doubtless heard plenty of tales about Eagle Island from his father, Peter, who had, of course, been present in the West station when the 1894 storm struck and helped bring the distraught Corish and Ryan families up the hill the following morning. Born in Donaghadee in 1904, while his father was serving on Mew Island, Eagle Island was one of Jack's earlier stations, after Inishtearaght. In fact, he was there for seven years, from 4th August 1925 to 13th April 1932, during which time he married Eileen Dempsey, the daughter of a local carpenter and builder. He was also a very keen ornithologist, contributing greatly to the re-introduced bird surveys of the 1920s.

After his stint on the Mullet, Jack served at Rathlin Island, Mew Island, Inis Oirr, Clare Island and Eeragh, before finally completing his service with his first non-insular posting, Inishowen. He died in Rathfarnham in 2002 in his 98th year.

Dominick O'Donnell (242) was only contracted to the station during 1926. Son of a Moville river pilot and born in 1882, he joined Irish Lights in 1910 and was made assistant keeper the following year. He was in his mid-forties before he first trod on Eagle Island in 1926. In 1942, he retired from Tory Island and died back in his beloved Moville in 1951 aged 68 years.



Michael Woods and family (above)



Laurence Power with first wife Mary Teresa Carey. She died in 1931 aged 45 while at Dundalk. He later married Kathleen Crilly.

Patrick Boyle (right)



William Alexander Hamilton (below)



Jack Lavelle (right) in later years



Bringing the twenties to a close, there was **James O'Connor (194)**, who served from 1929 to 1931 and **Joseph McGowan (270)**, on station from 1929 to 1933.

James, a Dubliner, was in his mid-forties when he came to Eagle Island as assistant keeper. He had married Lily Higginbotham, one of the famous lighthouse Higginbothams, in 1906 when he and Lily's father, John, were serving on Mew Island. He was transferred to the fourteen acres on 23rd February 1929 and sent up to Inishowen on 6th August the following year. He was transferred on promotion to PK to Blackrock Mayo at the end of 1931 and thereafter spent relatively short spells at Slyne Head, St. John's Point (county Down) and Samphire Island before retiring from Dun Laoghaire in 1940.

Joseph McGowan was another son of a river pilot and had married Rosses Point schoolteacher Mary Conboy in 1918. He arrived on Eagle on 21st October 1929 and was transferred to Rockabill on 5th August 1933. He was made principal keeper when he moved to Sligo lights in 1939. He retired in 1951.

The 1920s

The General Lighthouse Fund expenditure for the financial year April 1920 to April 1921 was published in March 1922. It appears that, out of a total expenditure of £8,618, by far the largest sum – £2,439 – was spent on Eagle Island. This may have had something to do with the point mentioned by Professor Joly in his inspection tour of 1918 that the light on Eagle Island, once one of the most powerful and economical in the world was now past its sell-by date. Indeed, in 1916, the Advisory Body on new Lighthouse Works – a joint body made up of members of Irish Lights and the Board of Trade – had advised that, although a new light on Eagle Island would be most welcome, improvements to Blackrock, Mayo, were preferable. This was of course during the war years when little or no new work was being sanctioned.

Captain A.A. Bestic, whom we have met previously, was a prolific newspaper contributor throughout his adult life. In the *Irish Independent* 21st September 1955, he described one of his first trips on the Irish Lights tender *Alexandra*, shortly after joining Irish Lights, which must have been in the early twenties.

Yesterday, as I stepped onto the bridge, I suddenly recalled my very first trip in her as second officer under Captain Johnnie Rowlands. The ship was approaching Eagle Island, a dangerous big rock off the coast of Mayo to land stores for the lightkeepers.

I was straight from deep sea vessels and, in consequence, had always been instructed to maintain a distance of at least five miles from outlying rocks and headlands.

Standing with Captain Johnnie on the bridge and with the engines at full speed, I watched the Alexandra heading towards the rock. Two miles distant, one mile distant, yet we did not slow down. It seemed to me as though we were careering towards destruction. Four hundred yards distant and Johnnie turned his back to the way we were going and started to tell me a funny story!

I felt desperate. Dare I risk breaking all sea etiquette and tell my captain that in one minute the ship would be piled up on the rocks. The story finished (I never heard a word of it.) Johnnie glanced abeam where two rocks were coming in tangent and at which point he always took action.

Leisurely, he strolled towards the telegraphs to stop one engine and put the other astern. Obediently the Alexandra swung around on her heel, but a biscuit-throw off the rock, and the anchor was dropped. I still recall surreptitiously mopping my brow."

In a later article¹³, Bestic gives the reason for Captain Rowlands' nonchalance:

He was keeping two landmarks astern in line and was thus assured that the ship was on her course. He was also watching for two outlying rocks abeam to come in tangent which told him exactly when to turn the ship and drop anchor.

'So you see,' he said, as he chatted about the subject later, 'it was not necessary for me to look around. Also,' and he gave me his whimsical grin, 'I was too interested in watching your face.'

An incident occurred in June 1922, while the Civil War was at its height, which could have proved decisive in the struggle between the pro- and anti-Treaty contingents. The details are contained in an internal memo which PK J. Sweeney dashed off to Head Office on 18th July of that year.

Sir, I beg to report that on the 11th inst., a party of the Republicans commandeered the telescope which the Boat Contractor, A. Gallagher, had. This telescope is the property of the Commissioner of Irish Lights and was supplied to the contractor some years ago.

The Republicans on that date took all the Binoculars and telescopes they could find from the people in the locality; but they did not interfere with anything at this station.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant, J. Sweeney PK.

Irish Lights duly informed the Department of Economic Affairs who advised that they were giving this affair their attention. Yeah, right.

Irish Lights then wrote back to J. Sweeney, advising him *to write off this telescope in the Store Account Book as 'Stolen by Raiders.'* Michael Collins breathed a sigh of relief.

Yet another case came to court in 1924 regarding the delivery of coal to Blackrock and Eagle Island lighthouses. John Padden of Inniskea sued James Padden (no relation) of Ballyglass at Belmullet District Court for non-payment of £29 due for servicing the two lighthouses the previous year. The defendant did not appear, so it was a rather one-sided case.

You remember 15th July '23?

Yes.

Did the defendant employ you to deliver coal to Blackrock and Eagle Island lighthouses?

Yes.

Did you know that this man had entered into a contract to have coal delivered to those lighthouses?

Yes.

What agreement did you make with him?

I asked £30 and he was not agreeable to pay more than £28, so we settled at £29.

A decree for the full amount was given with £2 2s expenses.

The practice of illegal foreign fishing in Irish coastal waters seems to have been rife in the 1920s and Eagle Island seems to have been an irresistible attraction for the French.

In July 1924, the captains of two French trawlers were up in court at Newport for fishing illegally inside the three-mile limit. Inspector Courtney of Belmullet, accompanied by some

¹³ Irish Independent 9th May 1958

Civic Guards went to Scotchport after being informed that two boats were fishing at Eagle Island. With two local fishermen, they rowed towards Eagle Island, where they asked the lightkeeper if the two trawlers in the distance had left any smaller boats around the island. The keeper responded that he had seen two boats about an hour previously.

The party then sighted a boat fishing and proceeded to arrest the three fishermen in it. As they were returning to land, they saw the other boat collecting the first boat. Turning around, they then proceeded to catch the crew of the second boat in the act of oyster fishing.

Taking both crews and boats back to Scotchport, the captains of the two trawlers were later arrested and, in Newport, were fined the maximum penalty of £10 and £1 costs. When both protested that they couldn't pay, they were told that their fishing gear would be impounded to cover the fines, at which they produced a wad of French francs and paid up.

In 1925, the Missions to Seamen Society focussed its attention on the problems of loneliness for keepers stationed on rock stations around the Irish coast. They encouraged their branches in Ireland and England to adopt a lighthouse or a lightship and send the keepers a parcel every month containing food and books, maybe a pipe, clothes, gloves, whatever it took to allay boredom. (No, I don't understand how gloves help keep loneliness at bay either.) At Christmas, they would maybe send them a plum pudding or extra little gift, simply to show they were not forgotten.

At Eagle Island, the Rev. J. Jackson (M.A.) of Castlebar was already doing this work for the keepers, with people donating reading material to him for onward transport via the relief boat. A letter of thanks from Principal Keeper Richard J. O'Donnell to the Reverend in November 1926 was printed in the *Connaught Telegraph*.

Rev. Sir,

Your letter of the 16th ult. duly to hand and myself and staff thank you most sincerely for your kind thought for us, and we appreciate very much any reading matter. We have at present five fitters and two labourers working here putting up a new fog-signal and incandescent light, so they are company for us. When the new fog-signal and light is finished, this will be one of the most up-to-date stations on the coast and will be well worthy of a visit. Should you be at any time in the vicinity, we would be very glad to see you and show you the whole plant. With best regards and trusting you are quite well,

Yours faithfully,

R. J. O'Donnell,

Principal Keeper

In 1929, it was reported that the council of the Mercantile Marine Service Association had been approached by the Commissioners of Irish Lights with a view to introducing wireless direction-finding beacons at certain stations on the west and south coasts of Ireland. These were Tory Island, Eagle Island, Inishtearaght, Mizen Head and the Old Head of Kinsale, with Eeragh on the Aran Islands another possibility. The beacons would have a reliable range of about 100 miles and would be a great aid to ships out on the open ocean getting their bearings, so to speak.

The Mercantile Marine Service Association voiced its approval of the project and suggested adding a beacon on Cape Clear in addition to those already mentioned.

Beasts

On such a small island, it seems incredible that mammals could survive, particularly during the winter season. Not only survive, but keep out of sight of the human occupants, the lightkeepers for decades.

Yet that is what happened to the white hare, a breed that is almost never seen in Ireland. It was sighted on Eagle Island in 1955 and again in 1963, posing the question of how it got there. One of the theories is that, in the pre-lighthouse days, a white-tailed eagle brought this creature over from the mainland to feed her young and somehow, the white hare escaped. She must have been 'with leverets' for, to produce a white hare, no hare of dark pigment can be involved in the mating process. Evidently, in-breeding occurred for the albino hare to have survived over decades.

It has also suggested that the early lightkeepers introduced hares to the island in order that they might have an emergency food supply if winter reliefs were severely held up. This happened on Tearaght, the outermost of the Blasket Islands, where rabbits were introduced for the same reason. As of 2011, the rabbits were still there but 'painfully thin.' Larry Butler caught a hare on Eagle once.

The Scottish winter hare changes its coat to brilliant white in the winter but this is climate-based and does not occur in Irish hares. One other theory is that the hares are actually witches and come out only at night.

It may be recalled that P. Knight in his 1836 classic *Erris in the Irish Highlands and the Atlantic Railway* quoted George Halpin junior's description of the island as being *nearly eleven acres and covered by sufficient pasture to support from two to three dozen sheep*. The inference here that the sheep would provide wool, meat and milk for the keepers and their families. However, it is not known if the ovine invasion ever took place on such a large scale. Agnes Corish, in one of her 1894 letters to the *Weekly Irish Times* mentions that there were five sheep on the island, a source of wool and milk and, in the case of long overdue reliefs, meat. In one report of marooning on the island in the 1950s, it was said that the keepers considered killing one of the sheep, should they be obliged to remain on the island over Christmas. They were taken off just in time!

Anthony Gallagher, son of long-time Principal Keeper John P. Gallagher (himself a son of Anthony and Nora Gallagher who had the boat tender) said that his Uncle Anthony kept ten or twelve sheep on the island during the summer months. He used to round them up in the lighthouse yard and disinfected them there. They would be transported over in a fairly large boat with two of their legs bound. It is apparently well-known in farming circles that if you bind all four legs of a sheep it will have a heart-attack with the stress of it all.

Al Hamilton says he never saw any sheep on the island, but *I remember one day taking a phone call from a man looking to find out who to contact for permission to graze his sheep out there. I hadn't a clue, so I took his number and went to find John Gallagher who was the senior man. I explained what the man wanted and John took the number and went into the office. The next minute, I heard, in an official-sounding voice, 'The grazing rights on Eagle Island belong to Mr. Anthony Gallagher and nobody else has the rights!' Anthony was John's brother, you see.*

Ciaran O'Briáin (1971-72) also reported seeing no sheep on the island during his stay there. Painter Andy Newman recalls the sheep on the island in the late eighties and having to round them up if a big storm was in the offing.

It should be remembered that a newspaper account of the 1836 storm (written 35 years later) mentioned that cows, sheep and pigs were swept off the island. Agnes Corish, writing in 1894, said that they had five chickens and a goat and there were also sheep on the island, indicating that the first two species belonged to the Corish family.

Goats were animals that were definitely introduced by lightkeepers at Irish Lights' suggestion. Hardy and a source of milk and fresh meat in emergencies, they survived down the decades. In the 1940s when bad weather held up reliefs for weeks and months, starvation was never an issue due to the presence of wild goats.

In view of the difficulty experienced at many lighthouse stations in obtaining supplies of fresh milk for young children, began an Irish Lights memo from 1918, the Commissioners desire to draw the attention of the Lightkeepers to the desirability of keeping goats where practicable.

It goes on to recommend the Anglo-Nunian and the Toggenberg breeds to keepers, rather than the 'ordinary Irish goat' because the milk yield is higher and they give milk for ten months of the year. However, the excited keeper is warned, goats of the better class (I kid you not) aren't nearly as hardy as the 'ordinary Irish goat' and at the first sign of a chill wind they start complaining that they want to be stall-fed.

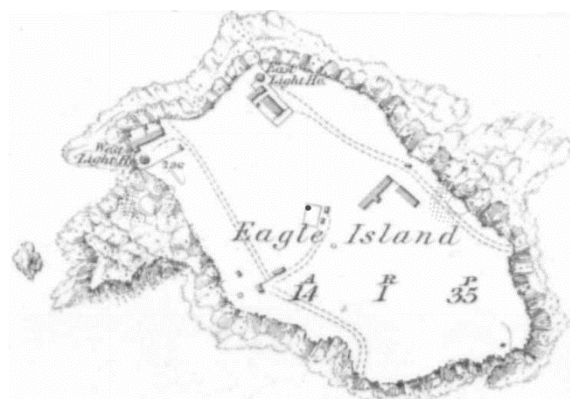
Keepers, said the memo, who are finding it difficult finding a good stud goat in the vicinity, should write to the Honorary Secretary of the Irish Goat Society in Trillick, county Tyrone, who presumably stepped up to the plate himself.

The East Landing

With the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map (1830s–40s) showing two separate footpaths leading down from the two separate lighthouses to the two separate landing places, it would be easy to infer that boats with goods or tradesmen for the West lighthouse would avail of the South landing, whilst the East landing would be used solely for the East lighthouse. That would probably have been the sensible option on a more benign coastline but, on Eagle, the choice of landing place would probably have been determined by

meteorological and maritime considerations.

Of course, once the East tower was no more, the preferred landing place became the south landing, if only for geographical and labour-saving reasons!



OS 1st Edition map of Eagle Island

Certainly, in later years, the East landing with its derrick was rarely used but another glance at that early map indicates the existence of an L-shaped compound of buildings, of which there is no sight nor sound today. These could have been the oil stores for the East lighthouse and they may have been dismantled and re-erected on the West side of the island after 1895. Note also from the map that there is no sign of the walled garden, a feature so prominent that one feels it would have been included, if it had been built.



On the way down the path from the East station are the remains of an old stone building with a newer concrete frame, probably a victim of the northerly swells. In the 1980s, this hut was used to house the dumper truck that hauled heavy goods from the South landing up to the West light. (Photo by Fergus Sweeney)

In this building, Fergus recently found a ball of twine and a rusty wall pin had sat undisturbed for years. They were probably used to fasten and secure items being hoisted onto the island from supply boats in years gone by. There was also a hook that probably belonged to the derrick. Fergus remembers ropes and tools in the shed, suggesting it was part of the landing stores.

Continuing down the path, we arrive at the top of the steps leading down to the East (or North) landing. The steps certainly look a lot less rough and ready than those at the South landing. They were built in 1883 by a Mr. Muldoon from plans by William Douglass, Engineer-in-Chief at Irish Lights. A derrick was established at the landing place at the time. As we have seen, there was a lot of damage to both derrick and landing stage a mere three years after construction. Daniel Hawkins PK in 1886 reported this when a storm in December of that year struck Eagle. Curiously, it was reported that a south-westerly sea was running at the time, so the East landing should have been relatively protected but it is clear that any storm on Eagle had the potential to cause damage anywhere on the island.



The ball of twine, wall pin and hook found in the dilapidated stone shed by Fergus (above)



The concrete steps leading down to the East landing (photo by Chris McDaid of the North Mayo Sea Kayakers June 2023)



Following the path down the east side of the island, we eventually come to the East (sometimes called the North) landing (photo by Al Hamilton 1970s) The derrick is of course no more. Ciarán O'Bráin says this landing was rarely used except on very calm days. Except by fishermen, of course!



Approaching the East landing from the sea (photo by Dave Horkan)

The 1930s

Stormy Seas

Mystery surrounded the death of the bo'sun of the Fleetwood steam trawler *Daily Chronicle*, who was apparently washed overboard near Eagle Island yesterday. Captain A. Novo, the skipper, said, *I am at a loss to know how (Christopher) Anderson fell overboard. The sea was calm and the vessel was not rolling. No shout was heard.*

Eight members of the crew were on deck with Anderson and none saw him disappear.

Mr. Anderson was 20 years old and a single man. He was the son of William Anderson, bo'sun of the Fleetwood steam trawler, *Our Monica*, who had fallen overboard and drowned on Christmas Eve five years previously.

Captain Novo was at pains to contradict early newspaper reports that he had been the skipper of the *Our Monica* at the time of the drowning – *Fleetwood Chronicle*, Friday 25th July 1930

Michael Brady, 45, an Irish fireman on the Fleetwood steam trawler *Somersby*, was seriously injured when the boat was struck by a tidal wave off Eagle Island. He received four broken ribs when he was dashed against the bulwarks, a deep incision to his left leg and head injuries. The wave was said to have been as high as the trawler's mast and so serious were Mr. Brady's injuries that Captain Gudmundson at once hauled up the trawl and steamed for Moville, where Brady was put ashore. After receiving treatment from a local doctor, he was taken by motor van to Londonderry City and County Infirmary where it was discovered that he was also suffering from pneumonia due to unavoidable exposure in his wet clothing. Sadly, he died of his injuries early on Monday morning – *Fleetwood Chronicle*, Friday 29th May 1931

Joseph Flanagan, 35, a fireman on the Fleetwood steam trawler (I see a trend developing here) *Hayburn Wyke*, was left behind at Killybegs with an eye injury when the vessel returned to her home port. While the trawler was fishing off Eagle Island, a piece of coal got lodged in the victim's eye. Efforts to remove it proving unsuccessful and the eye becoming seriously inflamed, it was deemed prudent to seek medical attention as soon as possible – *Fleetwood Chronicle*, Friday 13th May 1932

The following vessels: - *S.S. Agnes Wickfield*, *Ethel Taylor* and *Nancy Hague* of the New Docks Steam Fishing Company, Fleetwood; and the *Authorpe* of the Boston Deep Sea Fishing and Ice Company; *S.S. Tranquil* of the Endeavour Trawling Company; and the Exmouth arrived in Killybegs, having experienced the full fury of the gale while fishing at Eagle Island – *Strabane Chronicle*, Saturday 12th September 1936

A member of crew of the Fleetwood steam trawler, *Wellvale*, of the Boston Deep Sea Fishing and Ice Company, received serious injuries when his hand was crushed by the trawl door when hauling in the net in heavy weather at Eagle Island. After receiving medical attention at Killybegs, his immediate removal to Donegal District Hospital was ordered – *Belfast Telegraph*, Thursday 27th May 1937

A terrible tragedy occurred in January 1938 when the Fleetwood steam trawler *Bostonian* was lost with all twelve hands. The boat was a part of the Boston Deep Sea Fishing and Ice Company fleet. The last known definite location for the trawler was Eagle

Island when her skipper, Herbert Atkinson tried to call up the Boston control ship on January 21st but received no reply. Some of the crew were making their first voyage on the boat and eleven of the twelve men were from Fleetwood. Hopes that the boat might have been sheltering in some secluded cove on the Mayo coast slowly dispersed with the passage of time – *Liverpool Echo*, Monday 31st January 1938

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
Thomas Byrne	1929-31		John Lavelle	1925-32
William Snow	1931-34		James O'Connor	1929-31
Daniel O'Donnell	1934-36		Joseph McGowan	1929-33
William Friel	1936-39		Walter Coupe	1930-35
John Trant	1939-43		John Scott	1932-36
			John Trant	1933-37
			Patrick O'Donnell	1935-37
			Michael O'Connor	1936-40
			Patrick Staniforth	1937-39
			Edward O'Donnell	1937-41
			William Roche	1939-42

With Thomas Byrne in charge until 1931, it was **William Snow (211)** who filled the principal keeper's boots when he moved on. Born in Clontarf in 1880, his father was a coastguard and it seems that salt was always in his blood, for he went to sea at a young age.

While still an apprentice, he sailed with the *Embleton* carrying a general cargo from Liverpool to Dunedin and Wellington in New Zealand. Unfortunately, the ship didn't make it quite that far, being struck amidships in the Irish Sea by the Cunard liner *Campania* in thick fog. The *Embleton* went down in a matter of minutes in two separate pieces, one either side of the liner. Of the crew of eighteen, eleven were drowned, with William among the seven survivors.

If another family story is true and William was also shipwrecked in the Thames Estuary, then it was probably a wise career choice for him to join Irish Lights in May 1905. He put in his time on lights like the Fastnet, where he was serving when he married Rose McMinn in 1909. They had two children. William joined the staff of Eagle Island from the Baily on 29th June 1931, on promotion to principal keeper. He was on the rock for three years, being moved back to the Baily in July 1934, where he stayed until retirement in 1940. He died in Dublin in 1946, aged 66.

When William moved on in 1934, he was replaced as PK by **Daniel O'Donnell**, who we have met already when he was assistant keeper from 1923 to 1925. Hopefully they didn't let him tinker with the gas boiler.



William Friel (235), *left*, became principal keeper in 1936 and stayed for three years. He had been born in Ballymichael in Donegal, whose proximity to Fanad possibly explained how a farmer's son became a lightkeeper in 1908. That, and the fact that a cousin, James had been a keeper for many years. Five years later, while stationed up at Inishowen, William married Catherine Friel and they had four children.

He was stationed on Arranmore Island in 1935 when nineteen men and boys, returning from potato picking in Scotland, drowned when their yawl capsized ten minutes from Leagbarrow. He joined Eagle Island on 23rd October 1936 and stayed until his transfer to

Inishtrahull in August 1939. He took the pension in 1944 and died while living at Buncrana in 1967 aged 83.

John-Michael Trant (272) was the son of Jeremiah Trant, who had been PK at Eagle Island between 1905 and 1909. Born in the family public house in Portmagee in 1893, he went to sea as a deck-boy in 1908 when aged 15 and managed to fall from a mast and break his nose, thereafter snoring loudly in his sleep! He spent two years on the lightships from 1913, serving as Able Seaman on the South Rock lightvessel off the county Down coast.

In 1915 he transferred to the lighthouses and the following year became one of the very rare brand of keepers to have been stationed at Rue Point on Rathlin Island. From 1923-1926 he was a keeper on Blackrock lighthouse and lived in Blacksod, County Mayo where he met his future wife, Margaret Heneghan of the famous lightkeeping dynasty They married in Dublin in 1928 and Johnson, Mooney and O'Brien (yes, all three of them) made their wedding cake. He was apparently an expert in sea birds and a strong swimmer.

As a PK, he was no stranger to Eagle Island, as he served here for four years as an AK from 1933 to 1937. After a two-year hiatus, he took over the reins at Eagle Island in 1939 and served until 1943. He retired from the service in 1954 and died in December 1979.

Moving on to the assistant keepers, 1930 gives us our first sighting of a young **Walter Coupe (339)**, who would later serve two further terms on the island in the 1950s and 1960s. His father Frederick was a lightkeeper too and Walter had been born in Antrim in 1904, possibly in Larne for that is where his father was stationed in 1901. Joining Irish Lights in 1927, one of young Walter's earliest stations was indeed Rathlin Island, where he ended up in court at the wrong end of a paternity suit! He joined the team at Eagle in July 1930 on his promotion to assistant keeper. Those certainly were the days for him for he married local girl Mary Hopkins on 2nd January 1932. The couple had at least one child at Corclough before Walter was transferred to Rathlin O'Beirne in March 1935. In the 1940s, Walter would earn a reputation for himself for getting marooned at Blackrock lighthouse, Mayo,

and indeed, he smashed the Irish record in February 1943 by spending his 117th day cut off from the mainland. When informed of her husband's record-breaking exploits, his wife, Mary, remarked, *Well, that's not much good to me, is it?*

(It should be pointed out that in the nineteenth century, many keepers never left their isolated rock for years at a time – Joshua Redmond, as mentioned, spent seventeen uninterrupted years on Skellig Michael – but, then again, they usually had their wives and families with them!)

Walter returned to Eagle Island as principal keeper from 1951 to 1954 and again from 1962 to 1964. When the television was introduced to lighthouses in the early 1960s, Walter was known to shout, *Television is only fit for lighthouse keepers and mentally retarded children!* He settled in Belmullet after retirement and died in Barrack Street at an advanced age in 1987.

John James “Jack” Scott (293) came to Eagle Island in 1932 and stayed for four years as assistant keeper. A third generation lightkeeper, he had been born on Clare Island in 1894 where his father Alfred was stationed. He married Rathlin Island girl Margaret Mary McCurdy who sadly died aged 28 in 1920. He was another PK in the making, serving at the Maidens and also Blackrock, where he joined Walter Coupe in the joys of being stranded for weeks on end, more than once. It was he who found the body of Richie Power who was tragically drowned in a disused gas vat on Mew Island in the early 1950s.

Jack retired in 1955 and died two days before Christmas in 1980.

Arriving in 1935, **Patrick Joseph O'Donnell (360)** served as assistant keeper until November 1937 when he was transferred to Slyne Head. By this time, he would have been in his sixties. He had married Inisheer girl Delia Connolly while on that island and had two boys. His father John had been a lightkeeper and had been based on the Maidens when Patrick was born.



In 1936, **Michael J. O'Connor (363)** came unto Eagle Island in January 1936 aged 32 and departed for Wicklow in 1940. His father, John O'Connor, was also a keeper. Michael was one of the keepers marooned with Walter Coupe on Blackrock lighthouse for 86 days in 1943 and told reporters that he had killed thirty wild birds with a catapult to make soup. He married local girl Norah Kilroy from Pollacopple in 1938.

Michael O'Connor (left)

The much mis-spelled **Patrick Joseph Staniforth (317)** spent two years on the rock between September 1937 and 1939. Born in 1902 on the Aran Island of Inis Oirr, his lightkeeper father Samuel had two other boys – Henry and Samuel – who both became keepers. Patrick joined Irish Lights in January 1925 and had served at Mizen Head, Loop Head and Tuskar previous to his arrival on the Mullet. On this last transferral, he exchanged positions with John-Michael Trant. He was to go onto Hook Head and the Tuskar again before being invalided in 1944. He died unmarried in 1956 aged 54 years.

Keeper no. **372, Edward Stanislaus O'Donnell** joined Eagle on 3rd November 1937 and departed for Inishtrahull on 14th August 1941. He was another of the ubiquitous O'Donnells

descended from his grandfather, keeper John O'Donnell via his father, Patrick. He had been born at Valentia Lighthouse while his father tended the light there. Unlike most of his kin, he doesn't seem to have lasted in the job, for on his marriage cert in 1945, aged 32, he describes himself as a labourer.

William Patrick Roche (384), known as Willie, arrived in 1939 as a 22-year-old and stayed until 1943. He was the son of keeper Michael Roche and Cassie Breslin, having been born in the lighthouse dwellings on Valentia Island in 1917. Michael and Cassie had of course married during the five years that Michael spent at Corclough from 1907 to 1912. He was a brother of John Joseph Roche who would become principal keeper at Eagle Island in the 1950s.

While at Eagle Island, Willie spotted the crippled petrol tanker, '*San Demetrio*' while on his watch. His prompt message to the Admiralty resulted in a tug being despatched from the Clyde to take the ship in tow, thereby saving lives and averting an ecological disaster at the same time. He retired on 31st August 1977 after 38 years' service.

According to Eugene O'Leary, who worked under him in the sixties, William Roche was a very well-spoken man with a keen sense of humour and a sharp mind. Once, when travelling down to Castletown with Eugene, he stopped by a field near Bandon, grabbed a shovel from the boot of his car and started digging up potatoes. Naturally, the farmer came roaring up. *What the ___ do you think you're doing?* he shouts. *Excuse me, sir*, says Willie in his best accent, *I'm Professor William Roche from UCC and I'm doing a survey of potatoes in Cork and these are the best I've seen so far.* The farmer was so pleased he let Willie work away.

On another occasion, Eugene says himself and John Noel Crowley were greasing a derrick, when John saw Willie, the PK, coming down the hill. *Watch out, here comes Bollocky Bill, the sailor*, says John, rather too loudly. Willie came up. *Mr. Crowley*, he says, *I'm shocked that a man like yourself should use such coarse and vulgar language. You should have said 'Testicular William, the nautical adventurer.'*

The 1930s

Another of those terrifying storms, *the worst since 1928*, swept across the northern part of the country in early 1935, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Eagle Island naturally was badly hit but every scurrying storm cloud has its silver lining, as the *Western People* reported in August of that year that the damage caused was affording local people some valuable work. It also mentioned that the wireless direction-finding transmitter was also in the process of being constructed, adding to a further increase in local employment.

Such was this storm that Capt. A.A. Bestic remembered the aftermath vividly when writing in the *Irish Independent* on 9th January 1952.

In 1935, the lantern glass at the lighthouse at Eagle Island, co. Mayo, 220 feet above the water line, was smashed, he wrote. *A few days later I stood on the gallery which encircles the lantern of this lighthouse and looked down on the waters of the Atlantic, then placid below me, trying mentally to conjure up a wave that could reach to such a height. The effort was beyond my imagination.*

I turned again to look at the silent evidence, not only the broken glass of the lantern but the large iron cylinder, fourteen feet by ten which – so the lightkeepers informed me – had been hurled across the yard at the base of the tower.

I realised that, to create such damage, the height of the wave must have been higher than the lighthouse.

The Irish Press of 29th January 1935 also ran a piece on Eagle Island during the storm:

The ordeal of two lighthouse keepers, two miles off Erris (county Mayo) during the great gale of the weekend, was related to an Irish Press correspondent yesterday, began the report. Communication between the mainland and the island was cut off from Friday to Monday.

During the height of the gale, the four-inch-thick glass of the revolving lantern was smashed into fragments and the light was extinguished. The rugged coast was thus left in darkness, a death trap for ships blown out of their course by the storm.

Although the island is three hundred feet above sea level, dense spray from the gigantic waves found an entrance through the shattered lantern.

The fire in the keepers' living-room was put out; beds and clothing were saturated and for twenty-four hours, the keepers, Messrs. Trant and Scott sheltered in an underground chamber without fire, hot food or a dry stitch of clothing.

Their ordeal only ended when the storm spent itself, the sea moderated and it was possible to relight the fire.

To watchers on the mainland, the island for periods during the storm appeared to be completely submerged. Several large sea creatures were washed ashore in the Erris area and the foreshore was strewn with herring.

The Irish Independent, in a similar report, also mentioned that the elevator used in ascending and descending the lofty rock was swept away. I'm presuming this was the derrick, not an actual elevator. One can only assume that geologists were called in to discover how the island had grown 85 feet in height during the storm.

The two keepers were later commended on their action of operating the fog signal while the light was defective.

April of the same year saw the return of Eagle Island's old friends, the French, who again were caught red-handed on the wrong side of the legal limits. The case came to trial in July, with the French fishing boat captain Julian Nicholas, appearing before the District Court of Ballina, charged with illegal fishing at Donaghmore Head (Broadhaven) and Annagh Strand.

Captain Nicholas declared (through an interpreter) that he had not been fishing the Irish coast at all at all but had been fishing off Scotland and had put into Blacksod on their return journey for provisions at which point they were promptly arrested.

Peter Williams of Gladree, one of the Scotchport lighthouse boatmen, gave evidence that he noticed the boat about 100 yards from shore opposite his house. With the aid of his telescope (that he used for communicating with the lighthouse) he noted the boat's number and saw a motor launch working alongside the smaller boat. The smaller boat was lifting pots of crayfish from the water and transferring them to the larger boat. There were about 100 pots lifted and they were working for six hours.

The French captain replied that they were not in the area on the day in question.

Thomas Keane, also of Gladree, declared that he saw the French sailing boat at Donnaghmore Head several days later. It was also fishing off Eagle Island around the same time. They told him they had no fish, though the pots of crayfish were clearly visible.

The French captain said the boat's number was correct but they had been fishing above in Donegal Bay on the date in question.

The Justice said he was satisfied that the boat had been fishing and fined the defendant £32 with £28 costs and expenses. He also ordered the seizure of the trawler until such time as the fine was paid.

There was further bad weather in October 1935, as it was reported that thirteen, or maybe fourteen, men were marooned on Eagle Island with their provisions feared to be exhausted. On 22nd of that month, the *Irish Independent* wrote that the two keepers, two wireless technicians and nine local labourers were cut off on the rock, the eleven men being involved in erecting the wireless transmitter. Savage waves had doused the fires in the houses and the men had to live in their wet clothes for twenty-four hours without a hot meal. Communication with the mainland was by signalling only and there were some fears for the safety of the men.

Two days later, it was reported (by the same paper) that the number of men on the rock was up to fourteen (they had evidently omitted one of the keepers in the first report) and that a relief boat had finally managed to reach the island. Their provisions had run out the Wednesday previous and they had been subsisting on the tinned rations of the lightkeepers, who very graciously had shared their food rather than allow them to starve to death. The names of the men were also given: -

Lightkeepers – Messrs. P. O'Donnell, J. O'Donnell and J. Scott

Wireless engineers – P. Malone and P. Kavanagh (both Dublin natives)

Local labourers – M. Kilker, A. Geraghty, J. McIntyre, T. Carey, J. Reilly, P. Gaughan, P. Meenaghan, M. Gaughan and Leo Gaughan. One might wonder how Leo got his first name in print, while his co-marooned had to be content with initials only.

The nine labourers had been reduced to seven when the Irish Lights tender *Isolda* arrived from Blacksod on the island in July 1936 to offload a cargo of sand for use in the construction of the wireless transmitter. The number was further reduced down to zero when the seven men refused to unload the sand, declaring they were on strike for higher wages. The men were being paid £2 per week for their labours but due to the isolation of the workplace and the difficulty in receiving foodstuffs and changes of clothing, they considered this insufficient. The *Isolda* took the men on board and dropped them off at Broadhaven before heading for Killybegs, still carrying her cargo of sand. It is unknown how the dispute was resolved.

Keeper Pat Staniforth (the papers called him 'Stainfort') was in the news in February 1939, when tempestuous seas and stormy weather delayed his relief by four weeks. Painting a terrifying picture, the *Evening Echo* called the island *one of the most dangerous, if not the most dangerous, parts of the Irish coast. All around the towering cliffs are submerged rocks and, within the last fifty years, many fishing currachs have been swept to destruction on them, and lives lost.* Mind you, they also increased the size of the island to 23 acres and had it towering 500 feet above the Atlantic.

Mr. Staniforth had a plentiful supply of food, apparently – the lighthouse always kept six months emergency rations – but he had run out of tobacco, a common complaint of

marooned keepers. You'd think that Irish Lights would have kept an emergency supply of tobacco at the ready. Maybe he was able to borrow some from the other two keepers cut off with him.

As an aside, the *Echo* remarked that the island lay across from the mainland, where the proposed transatlantic cable linking the telephone services of Europe and America, was supposed to come ashore. This would have been Frenchport, long mooted as the terminal, but it never happened.

The Radio Beacon



The engine house and the radio beacon mast (photo by Fergus Sweeney 2022)

Towards the end of the 1920s, Irish Lights sent a request to the Imperial Merchant Service Guild requesting the opinions of its members as to the merits of various locations on the south and west coasts of Ireland that could be used as wireless direction-finding stations.

These were radio transmitters fixed to a mast and would allow ships and boats, and indeed aircraft, with the necessary equipment to pinpoint their location exactly and were regarded as a veritable game-changer in the merchant trade. The Morse code signals were transmitted on a wavelength of 1,000 meters and each had its own call-sign. During clear weather the signal would be sent once an hour and, in foggy weather, for one minute in every five. They would have a range of between 50 and 100 nautical miles.

The first of these transmitters was established at the light-less Mizen Head station in early 1931 and the one at Tory was established later that year. Proposals for transmitters at Inishtearaght, off the Dingle peninsula, and at Eagle Island were put forward in 1930 but had to be postponed due to the decline in the shipping trade, allied to a depressed state of the general lighthouse fund.



The East radio mast (photo courtesy Al Hamilton)

A conference in 1931 fixed the wavelengths for Inishtearaght, Eagle Island, Aran North, Old Head of Kinsale and the Kish lightvessel, with the agreement that these would be established in the order stated. A regular radio beacon would also be established on the Coningbeg lightvessel off the Wexford coast.

On 21st January 1936, Irish Lights put out a Notice to Mariners saying that the wireless beacon was now in operation bringing to six their number around the coasts of northwest Europe. (Aside from the Mizen and Tory, these were located in Scotland, the Scilly Isles and France.) The radio beacon fog signal, it said, had the call sign E.I.F. in Morse Code and was broadcast on 1008.4 meters. The signal was: -

- Four transmissions of the call sign, occupying eight seconds;
- 20 groups of five dashes, occupying 40 seconds;
- Another four transmissions of the call sign, occupying eight seconds;
- 20 groups of five dashes, occupying 40 seconds;
- Two transmissions of the call sign, occupying four seconds.

During fog, the entire 100 second signal would be broadcast every six minutes, starting at 4, 10, 16, 22 etc minutes past the hour.

During clear weather, the times of transmission would commence at 10, 16, 40 and 46 minutes past the hour.

The two masts were located midway between the West lighthouse and the discontinued East lighthouse and were readily recognisable from the coast.

In his 1971 book *Lighthouses and Lightships*, Lee Chadwick quotes a Mizen lightkeeper as to how it operated.

The Radio Beacon transmits for one minute every six minutes, he said. There are six stations in the group which transmit in the following order: Eagle Island, Mizen Head, Mull of Kintyre, Round Island in the Bristol Channel, Tory Island and Point de Gréach in France. Each station transmits for one minute in turn, the Mizen starting at one minute past the hour. Presumably, then, Eagle started bang on the hour. There were two transmitters and two clocks, so if one piece of apparatus failed, the other would take over automatically.



1970s photo by Al Hamilton showing the radio beacon mast much further down the island than it is at present. It is situated just behind the first of three oil stores which are also gone. Because the mast was felt to be somewhat close to the helipad, it was moved up behind the engine house at the top of the slope. Knut Janson has a video showing the two radio masts together. The transmitter worked from a wire between them.

Most ships, continued the unnamed keeper, are fitted with a Direction Finder, which has a special rotating loop aerial. With this, both in fog and clear weather, they can tune in to these signals long before they can see a light or hear a foghorn. By getting bearings from a fix, the ship could then work out its exact position, but a third bearing was generally taken, just to be sure, to be sure.

The original radio beacon was run using three 21hp engines, though in reality, only one was necessary, the other two providing back-up. Keepers with an aptitude for technology were generally assigned to the stations that had radio beacons.

February 1954 brought wonderful news to the keepers stationed on Eagle. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported that three triple-engined generating installations (generators?) to power the radio beacons at Tory Island, Eagle Island and Mizen Head were about to be despatched. The sets, cried the article, had been designed *to operate a 24-hour day on a shift system* – your guess is as good as mine – and featured some novel safety devices. They had been prepared and assembled by the Belfast firm of Edwards and Edwards to Irish Lights specifications.

A newspaper report from 1956 mentions the fact that 'the lower radio beacon mast,' standing 75 feet tall was frequently subsumed by water during a bad storm, indicating the presence of a higher mast.

In the early 1980s, SAK Louis Cronin had to make sure the radio beacon was operational while on duty. *One time, when I was on the 2-6 watch, he recalls, the radio beacon transmitter stopped working. I was keeping watch and saw it all right. And I thought, there's a load of spare parts in the shed, I'll go down and fix it. So, I turned off beacon number one and turned on beacon number two; then I replaced the part in beacon number one, turned off beacon number two and turned on beacon number one again. Sorted. Problem was, I missed one six-minute cycle but I'd fixed the beacon.*



*The Marconi WB6 radio beacon which was on Eagle in 1969. It probably isn't the original 1937 beacon as this model appears in a 1952 Marconi catalogue! This beacon was replaced shortly afterwards by the Aga beacon. They were located in the engine room, second door on the right!
(Photo courtesy Al Hamilton)*

That morning the principal keeper came into me saying Irish Lights had been on to tell him that we'd missed a six-minute cycle. I said, 'So what?' He went mad. I told him, yes, I'd missed one cycle but the beacon was fixed. Who told you how to fix the beacon? I figured it out myself. You're not to fix the beacon. I should have been informed and I'd have put a call out for engineers to come out and fix it. Well, says I, haven't I saved you a lot of money?

In the great storm of November 1986, the unthinkable happened and one of the radio beacon masts came down, bent over the engine house. Technicians were sent out immediately to get it working again.

According to the Irish Lights website, *From 1st April 1992 the Radio beacon operated continuously, in accordance with new internationally agreed regulations whereby it was agreed that Medium Frequency Maritime Beacons should operate singly and continuously rather than in groups on a time-shared basis. In more recent times utilisation of radio direction finders by Mariners has been to a great extent superseded by more modern*

technology. For this reason, the Commissioners discontinued their Medium Frequency Radio beacon service on 1st February 1999.



Engine room and beacon (photo by Sean Doyle August 2020)

A Hard Station

It was said that there were two types of stations in Irish Lights. There were hard stations and there were tough stations. The hard stations were generally the offshore lighthouses where a keeper learned his trade and served his time, whereas the tough stations were generally on the mainland and were a reward for an aging keeper after years of hardship. Eagle Island definitely fell into the 'hard station' category.

Richard Taylor, in his wonderfully anecdotal but boringly titled *Lighthouses of Ireland* also remarked that there were four 'punishment' stations under Irish Lights jurisdiction. Not every keeper who was sent to the Fastnet, the Maidens, Blackrock (Mayo) or Eagle Island was guilty of some indiscretion or other. It would have been bad policy to concentrate all the offenders on one station! But it was felt that any keeper who stepped out of line was liable to find himself packing his bags for one of those lighthouses.

Every year, the Commissioners of Irish Lights organised a tour of inspection, taking in all the lighthouses around the coast. It would take approximately three weeks to complete and the keepers and their families would be in a pickle for weeks beforehand, making sure that everything was polished and cleaned. Children would be warned as to being seen and not heard as the posse of officials inspected the tower and the dwelling houses.

Most of these inspections are lost in the mists of time but in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, the eminent scientist, Sir Robert Ball, Royal Astronomer of

Ireland was invited to attend several of the tours. Not only was Sir Robert an avid lecturer and recounted some of the anecdotes of his tours in his many speaking engagements but he was also an avid photographer. From his tours of inspection, a large body of photographs of his visits to lighthouse stations from 1903 to 1909 can now be seen in the National Library's photographic collection, the best of which were collated into the *Safety for All* pictorial book brought out by Irish Lights in 2009.

Some of the stories of these inspections have gone down in the annals of lighthouse history. There was the story of the lightkeeper who was rebuked by a commissioner for allowing his heavily-pregnant wife to sit down while she addressed an inspector, for example. And Elizabeth Lavelle (nee Healy) recalled that, after one inspection, they received the inspectors' report saying that the station was in very good order but there was a cobweb in the north-west corner of the gas house. Nowhere was safe from the inspectors – even the bedrooms of married couples were minutely inspected. One of the inspectors used to wear white gloves and run a finger over the tops of doors to check for dust.

Al Hamilton says that the photo below was taken on the sloping road from the landing to the accommodation. *I think that during that time the flat roof of the accommodation was strengthened with eighty tons of reinforced concrete and steel, all of which would have needed to come from the landing.*

Tough times! In later years the commissioners provided a mechanical barrow driven by a single cylinder diesel engine to take the strain off this kind of work. And during my time there a proper builders' dumper truck was supplied which made life a whole lot easier.

The dumper truck arrived about 1977. Al Hamilton asked the first officer on the CIL ship, *Atlanta*, three days before arrival at Eagle, to get one of the ship's engineers to separate the dumper truck into three sections – body, bucket and engine – to avoid exceeding the loading limit of the aerial hoist.

It wasn't done, says Al. He came ashore on Eagle and was there when the lift was attempted. At the very top of the lift the dumper's wheels caught the edge of the landing platform and the whole load went flying down the wire, endangering the guys in the cutter below.



Hauling up the oil (1940s photo by John F. Connell)



The yellow dumper truck before it became amphibious (photo Richard Cummins)

By the grace of God, I managed to stop it with the hoist controls before it hit the sea! We had to land it down on the rocks and separate the bucket to get it up. In fairness he did apologise.

The yellow dumper truck was indeed a boon to the keepers and it was kept in the shed near the steps to the East landing. *It would probably still be there if it hadn't rolled off the island one day when the handbrake failed*, says Fergus Sweeney.

Former keeper-turned-pop star, Eddie Fitzgerald, now leading tours to Ballycotton lighthouse, was never on Eagle but he remembers being on the Baily when some of his fellow SAKs returned from the island. *The PK there had the SAKs breaking stones for the pathway down to the landing*, he remembers. *The same PK greeted one SAK, when he arrived at the station, with 'Hope you brought your overalls with you.'*

Eagle Island was considered one of the Irish coast's 'hard stations,' says Al Hamilton, who was there from 1973 to 1978, *as it was not on the mainland, was very exposed to weather and was a high maintenance station.*

All lighthouse stations back then had all perimeter walls whitewashed i.e., painted with lime wash, so that the walls acted as a daymark, making the station visible from a long way off. This was done by the keepers using buckets of lime wash, large brushes and a lot of ladder work. All this was done in the spring of the year, in preparation for the annual tour of inspection by the Commissioners and dare anything be amiss for them!

Louis Cronin was a young SAK when he was sent to his local station, Eagle Island, for six months in the early 1980s.

Did I enjoy my time on Eagle? Let's just say, it was 'all right.' *It was like a prison, absolutely nothing to do. Plenty of space to roam around in, though, I'll give it that. You must remember, I was an eighteen-year-old boy stuck on an island with two much older keepers. I used to climb the radio beacon mast and watch people of my own age going to the disco.*

Basically, I was lonely. I could never understand the logic of sending an eighteen -year-old boy to share an island with two older men.

Every SAK was given a diary that they had to fill in every day and it had to be a true reflection of what you did and learned. Every morning at breakfast, the PK, who thought he owned the place, used to tell me word for word what I was to put in the diary. He would then sign it every day. I used to do what he said, but I'd leave some lines blank. He'd sign it but then, when it was time to submit the diary to Irish Lights at the end of the month, I'd fill in the blank lines with the truth, rather than what they wanted to hear. I'd talk about homosexuality in the lighthouse, that sort of thing. Ended up on a disciplinary over it!

There were two good lessons that joining Irish Lights taught me. One was how to tolerate living with people that I didn't really get on with, older people with whom I had nothing in common.

The other thing was the cleaning. Even today, I have to make sure that everything is spotlessly clean. Other keepers are the same. It really gets ingrained into you. We had to polish the brass, clean the lens, polish the prisms. There were two Ruston Hornsby engines in the engine room. Absolutely gleaming, so they were. 350 revs, driving two compressors into two foghorn receivers. All of which ended up getting tossed over the cliff.

Irish Lights would send us down sacks and sacks of rags for cleaning. One time, the PK told me to polish the engine room floor and I did, fair enough, and found a pair of ladies' panties in with the rags. For a joke, I pinned the panties on the noticeboard and wrote a letter to Irish Lights saying they really ought to screen the rags before sending them out!

Richard Cummins who served there twice in the 1980s agrees it wasn't an easy station. There was always something to be done on Eagle. It was one of the hardest stations. A lot of work. You had to keep up with the maintenance. You had to put two inches of grease onto the derrick every year. The engine room had to be spotless too.

The PK was God, even at the land stations, but especially on the rock, says Alan Boyers, who also served on Eagle in the 1980s. There was even a hierarchy at meal times. The PK sat at the head of the table, the Senior AK sat opposite him and the junior member of the team sat in the middle. This even happened in the pub onshore! The principal keeper was always known as Mister this or Mister that, to their face. They were often called different names behind their backs. Two of the cleaner names were the Minister for Hardship and the Deputy Minister for Hardship

who, as the monikers suggest, were sticklers for discipline and hard work.



Landing barrels of oil on Eagle with the automatic hoist (photo John F. Connell from Beam 40)

The 1940s

Eagle Island is not in reality an island, but a tall, irregular strip of rock jutting up in the Atlantic – Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner – 13th March 1943

Stormy Seas

Curiously, I could find no newspaper reports of ships being damaged or sunk by storms during this decade. Naturally, it was an extremely dangerous time for maritime craft but for reasons other than the weather. Nor could it be said that the weather was unusually clement for several keepers were reported to be stranded on Eagle Island and Blackrock due to the contracted tender being unable to reach them. Maybe ships were simply getting better and navigational aids improving?

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
John Trant	1939-43		Michael O'Connor	1936-40
John Deasy	1943-44		Edward O'Donnell	1937-41
Edmond Fitzgerald	1944-47		William Roche	1939-42
Hugh Duggan	1947-51		John Connell	1940-44
			Patrick Whelan	1941-44
			Patrick McMahon	1942-45
			Jeremiah O'Brien	1943-45
			Laurence Butler	1944-46
			Michael O'Connor	1945-50
SAK / Temp			George James	1946
Ed Fitzgerald jnr	1941		Neil Loughrey	1946-48
Daniel Coughlan	1947		John Murphy	1946-49
Don Scanlan	1947-48		Michael Sweeney	1948-56
Dominick Gaughan	1949		Edward Cummins	1949-52

With John Michael Trant being dealt with in the 1930s, the next principal keeper of this war-ravaged decade was **John Thomas Deasy (312)**, who served on Eagle Island from 1943 to 1944. With his twin brother, Denis, he was born in Castlefreke, Clonakilty in 1897, son of a farmer.

He enlisted in Irish Lights in January 1924 and became an assistant keeper the following year, when he was sent to Skellig Michael. He was there until 1929 when he was transferred to Inis Oirr on the Aran Islands, where he met and married farmer's daughter, Margaret Griffin, with whom he had three children. Spells at Inishtrahull, Clare Island and Inishowen followed prior to his arrival on Eagle as principal keeper in 1943. After retirement, he moved back to county Cork where he passed away in 1982, aged 84 years.

Edmond ‘Ed’ Fitzgerald (303) – sometimes referred to as Edward – succeeded John Deasy as principal keeper and successfully steered the island out of the World War. He had been born in Ballycotton in 1898, the son of a labourer and had spent time in a German prisoner of war camp during the First World War.

After returning home, he joined Irish Lights in 1923, and one year later married Mary Ward from Fermanagh. He served at Galley Head, The Maidens, Fanad Head, Inishtrahull, Inishowen and Eeragh before being promoted to PK at Loop Head. Two years later the family moved to Corclough and Eagle Island and the fun began. In *Beam 24* (1996-97), Ed’s daughter Pauline recounted what happened next.

I met this dashing young assistant keeper named Larry Butler and, as the song says, all the nice girls love a sailor ... I quickly learned semaphore and spent a lot of time talking with the flags.

Eventually I was caught by my father and packed off to my uncle in Bray, in the hope that I would go on with my nursing career. Meanwhile, I managed to get word to Larry and tell him where I was. (The methodology of this communication was that they had a hole in a wall, somewhere onshore, and in it, they had placed a bean tin and they used it to communicate with each other!)

I was waiting for a letter from him when he walked into my uncle’s public house! Imagine my excitement when I saw him. My heart missed a beat and nearly went out through the top of my head. At this stage I had thought he was still out on the lighthouse. There he stood and said, ‘Will you come back to Belmullet and we will get married?’ ‘Now?’ I asked and he answered ‘Yes. I have all the arrangements made.’ I said ‘Yes’ and we headed back to Belmullet.

I had only one request. I wanted my sister Margaret, who was at home, as my witness. To arrange this was a problem as my mother thought I was still in Dublin. We contacted a friend of Larry’s, Tom Shevlin, who had a car, and told him our plans. We went in the car to collect Margaret. Tom called to the house and said Margaret was wanted in town. Mother said ‘OK’ but she would come too. Panic! Tom raced out to tell us. Fortunately, his car was a big Ford V8. He put both of us on the floor in the back of the car and then covered us with a rug.

When Mother and Margaret came out, he put the two of them in the front seat beside him and we headed off for town. When Mother got out, we popped up from the back and told Margaret our plans. We kept in hiding until we were sure Mother had gone home, then went off to see Fr Kilgallon. He was a good friend of Larry’s, a very understanding man who had been an army chaplain.

The knot was tied, and I exchanged my life as a lightkeeper’s daughter for the life of a lightkeeper’s wife.

All this time my father was out on the lighthouse and didn’t know what was happening ashore. However, we were all reconciled after floods of tears, and a clear assurance that I was not pregnant.

Eventually, Ed finished up in Mornington, county Meath, where he was in charge of the three Drogheda pile lights on the Boyne estuary for twelve years. He retired in 1965 and moved to Enfield in Middlesex where he died in 1970.

Hugh Duggan (332) arrived at Eagle Island in 1947 and stayed for four years. He was a third-generation keeper. His grandfather, also Hugh, had been the keeper onshore at Calf

Rock when the tower came crashing down in 1881. Eight years later, he died from a fall at Duncannon lighthouse. Hugh junior's father, John Duggan, later joined Irish Lights as a keeper; his uncle, William Duggan, served on the lightships and became Master of the South Rock light-vessel.

Hugh himself had been born at Rock Island in 1907 when his father was stationed on the Fastnet. He had married Norah Heneghan while he was at Slyne Head and would later spend time at Rockabill as principal keeper.

Hugh's daughter, Doris, spoke many years later of an incident when she saw a boy kicking and giving a bad beating to a donkey on the road between Corclough and Belmullet. So traumatic was this incident that Doris later became the Honorary Secretary of the Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare.¹⁴

John Frederick Connell (373) appears to have been one of the great characters of the lightkeeping world. Despite being referred to as a Belfast man, he actually first saw the light of day on the picturesque Scattery Island off Kilrush in the Shannon estuary where, in 1915, his father of the same name was stationed. His mother, the exotically named Florence Elizabeth Pavlosky, was probably the last woman to give birth on Rotten Island off Killybegs five years earlier.

John Connell was evidently specifically selected for the Eagle Island position due to his mechanical background, as three separate newspaper reports in March 1943 make plain:

Marooned Lighthouse Keepers – One a Native of Belfast –

Lighthouse-keeper John Connell, a native of Belfast, has been marooned on Eagle Island Lighthouse, eight miles off the Co. Mayo coast – really? – for the past 65 days, and there is not any immediate hope of his relief.

With him are Principal Keeper John Grant – (sic – should be John Trant) – and keeper Patk. M'Mahon.

Eagle Island is not in reality an island, but a tall, irregular strip of rock jutting up in the Atlantic, and is uninhabited save for the lighthouse keepers.

The lighthouse keepers' food problem on Eagle Island is not yet regarded as critical, as many wild goats graze on its slopes. And, when short of food, the lighthouse keepers kill and eat them. – Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner – 13th March 1943.

On Thursday 18th March, the *Belfast Telegraph* carried an update with a few more details, under the headline *Belfastman 74 Days Marooned on Irish Lighthouse*.

A further unsuccessful attempt was made yesterday to relieve Eagle Island lighthouse, off the Co. Mayo coast, where the young Belfastman, lighthouse keeper John Connell, has been marooned for the past 74 days.

It may be many more days before a relief boat can reach the island, because it is surrounded by dangerous submerged rocks, and relief can only be carried out in very calm weather.

Connell, who has six years' service in the Irish Lights, was specially selected for service at Eagle Island, because it is one of the most important on the Irish coast.

It has a foghorn and wireless beacon, which are run by three 21h.p. engines. Connell, who was a mechanic, looks after the intricate machinery.

¹⁴ *Western People* 11th March 1981

If the weather does not improve, it may be some time before this lighthouse keeper is relieved from his lonely outpost in the Atlantic.

Fortunately, the 'many more days' turned out to be three in number, as the *Belfast Telegraph* reported to a spellbound nation on 22nd March.

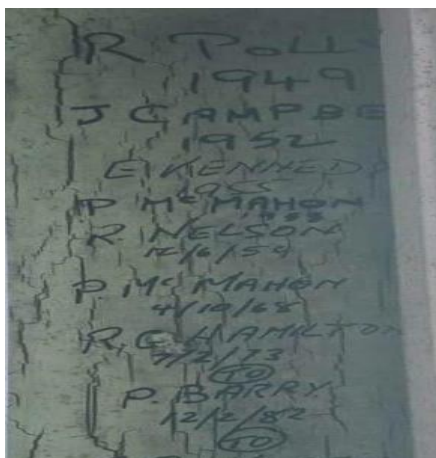
Lightman Relieved.

John Connell, the Belfast lighthouse keeper, was relieved yesterday, after having been marooned on Eagle Island lighthouse, off the Co. Mayo coast, for 77 days. 'It's all in the lighthouse keeper's day's work,' he said, 'but I am glad to be on dry land again.' Connell's father and grandfather were lighthouse keepers. His family resides in Belfast.

John Connell became most closely associated with Black Head lighthouse overlooking Belfast Lough. He spent six years there as an assistant keeper between 1956 and 1962 and eight years as a PK from 1967 until automation in 1975. He then became the attendant there from 1975 to 1990, with his wife completing another eight years. He died in 2005.

Patrick Vincent Whelan (396) was born at Crookhaven lighthouse in April 1921, while his father Patrick was stationed on the Fastnet. He does not appear to be related to the nineteenth century lightkeeping Whelans. His father died from a heart attack while principal keeper at Hook lighthouse in 1944. By this time, Vincent, as he was more commonly known, had joined the service (in 1941) and he spent three years on Eagle from that year. He was promoted to principal keeper at Dun Laoghaire in 1969 and served at Wicklow Head from 1972 to retirement in 1981. He died in 2002.

Patrick 'Paddy' McMahon (390) was a Clare man and only four years in the job when he was transferred to Eagle Island in 1942. He was one of those rare breeds of men from Scattery Island in the Shannon estuary, whose families spent generations on the sea as river pilots in the days when it was a very dangerous occupation. Paddy's father Austin had been one such river pilot. Paddy had come to Eagle Island from Clare Island and had married shortly before his transfer. A keen ornithologist, he was active in recording species seen and/or caught on the island. He ended up spending a lot of his working life in Northern Island lighthouses, particularly on Mew Island in the Copelands. He and Mary (O'Malley) had five children. He retired on 31st January 1979 after forty years' service. He had apparently refused to join the 2d per week insurance scheme to cover his burial if he died in service, figuring that they'd have to bury him some way or another, 2d per week or not. He died in 2003.



Graffiti on the back of a Mew Island wardrobe, Paddy McMahon a serial offender!

A year after Paddy McMahon arrived in 1942, **Jeremiah 'Jerry' T. O'Brien (414)** joined the party. He stayed for two years. He had been born in Cloyne in 1920 and joined Irish Lights in January 1943. After ten months as a 'proby' – probationary keeper – he was promoted to assistant keeper in November 1943 and packed off to Eagle Island. According to his nephew, Ciarán – who served at Eagle Island in the seventies – Jerry was a great man with the needle

and thread and would embroider pictures and even make Irish Dancing outfits. He was promoted to PK in 1971 and retired from Roches Point in 1980. He died in December 2006.

Lawrence Joseph 'Larry' Butler (391) was the next up, serving two years as assistant keeper from 1944 to 1946. Incidentally, his birth cert is spelt Laurence with a 'u' whereas his marriage cert has a 'w.' He has born in that haven of maritime industry, the Faythe in Wexford, in 1919, his father being a sailor on a lightship at the time, later rising to Master. Larry had spent time in the Merchant Navy as well as the lightships before joining the lighthouse service at the beginning of the war. He had served at Mine Head in Waterford and out at Blackrock Mayo before sauntering up to Corclough and Eagle Island where he met young Pauline Fitzgerald. Their son, Gerry, author and lighthouse historian, recounts a story that his father told him of an incident on Eagle.

When my father was on Eagle, he was a very slight man, young, fit and light on his feet. One time, he'd been on the island a while and was long overdue a relief and of course, he'd have been into his tinned rations. Anyway, he saw this hare on the island and he watched it and looked to see where the hare was going. And it was heading out over a very narrow patch of grass not far from the lighthouse. And so he rigged up a trap for the animal and placed a net in the patch where the hare had gone and of course, the next time he saw the hare, it was heading back the same way. And it followed the same route and it got caught in the net. And there was a little store in the lighthouse compound where they used to keep the potatoes. And hadn't the potatoes grown over the last time they'd seen them and they were a fair size. And so my father went to work and for dinner that night they all had hare soup with brand spanking new potatoes!

Larry and Pauline had fifteen children together, two of them becoming keepers themselves. They ended their days at Galley Head, with Larry and then Pauline taking over the attendant's position after automation. Their son, Gerry, author of *The Lightkeeper*, is now the attendant.

From 1945 to 1950, **Michael Joseph O'Connor (363)** served at Eagle as assistant keeper. He had been one of the keepers stranded on Blackrock Mayo with William Coupe in 1943, when a storm smashed the landing derrick and the stone steps, so the fury of the Atlantic seaboard would not have been a great shock to him. This was his second spell on Eagle Island, having served previously in the late 1930s.

Later, when he became a principal keeper, he developed a great liking for the card game, cribbage. So much so, that it was remarked by one lightkeeper that he was the only PK who ever had a dirty engine room, so busy was he playing cards!

George Matthew James (329) was the son of George William James, also a keeper. In fact, George Matthew was at least fourth generation lightkeeper on the James side and the family was intertwined with the Brownells and Kennedys who both went back equally as far. Born in Holywood, county Down, in 1904, he had married Cork girl Anne Shannon in 1933 while serving up in Greencastle, co. Donegal.

The *Southern Star* was distraught at the loss of George to Eagle Island on 30th March 1946. *Mr. George James, lightkeeper at the Bull Rock lighthouse since 1941, it wrote, who has just been transferred to Eagle Island Lighthouse, county Mayo, was very popular in Beara, to which he came first in 1927. He was a great supporter of the G.A.A. and when off*

duty never missed any match in which a Beara team was engaged. A keen card player, he won several prizes at local whist drives. His wife is a native of Castletownbere.

Another keeper with a family pedigree in Irish Lights arrived on the Mullet in 1946 and stayed for two years. **Neil Joseph Loughrey (376)** would have heard plenty of stories about the station prior to his arrival there. His father, Neil, had served at Eagle Island for eight years between 1910 and 1918 and on the seventh of those years, Neil himself had been born. His mother was Polly Ryan who had written the one of the 1894 storm letters. Joining Irish Lights in 1936, he was made assistant keeper two years later, serving at Arranmore, Loop Head, Inishtearaght and Black Head before joining Eagle on 27th May 1946.

Speaking at his retirement as Balbriggan lighthouse attendant in 1989, he commented on his time at Eagle. *One of my regrets is that I didn't have a video camera to record some of the spectacular storms I saw there. Nowhere else did I see weather like that during my time as a keeper.*

He had married in 1941 and wound up fathering seven children. He had later stints at Rathlin Island and Rockabill, before retiring from Ferris Point in 1977 after 40 years of service. He passed away in Balbriggan in 1995 aged 78.

I can find practically no information about **John J. (Sean) Murphy (436)** who served on the rock between 1946 and 1949. He had joined the service the previous year and had been born on December 8th 1924. We *do* know, from the wives marooning story (see p.222), that he was married. He was on the Tearaght by 1952.

Donatus 'Don' Scanlan (448) was another of those Scattery Island men who were born with Shannon water for blood. Born in 1925, his father was the last in a long family line of river pilots, developing an affinity with the sea that produced many merchant seamen, lightshipmen and lightkeepers.

Don joined the Merchant Navy as an eighteen-year-old and sailed the seven seas for three years before taking and passing the Irish Lights examination. After a year as a supernumerary, he was made assistant keeper and began his wanderings around the Irish coast, being promoted to principal keeper whilst on Inishtrahull in 1974. He retired in 1985 but continued working as an attendant at Youghal lighthouse for several years.

In his retirement, Don brought out a delightful book called *Memories of an Islander – A life on Scattery and Beyond* (Clasp Press 2003), a biography of not only his own life but also the vibrant community that existed on Scattery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, although he never served on Eagle as assistant or principal keeper, he writes in the book of his first ever station as a supernumerary keeper one month after joining the service towards the end of 1947 – Eagle Island. It is a passage that puts some meat on the bones of mere names and dates.

After one month at the Baily, I received my first temporary posting to Eagle Island, a small, windswept island of about ten acres off the Mayo coast. Luckily, I had spent only one day in Belmullet when the weather conditions became suitable. The landing stage at the lighthouse was located at Corclough, a small village three miles along the coast from Belmullet. There was one shop in the village that catered for the keepers of Eagle Island. The shopping list, which was drawn up for me by Mr. King at the Baily before my departure, was a hefty one. There was an eight stone bag of potatoes, eight stone of flour, one dozen tins of Killarney sweetened milk, fourteen pounds of sugar and lots of coffee, bread and

tea, jam and seven pounds of butter, two legs of mutton, a large amount of salted bacon, turnips and other vegetables. The supplies were taken to the beachhead at Corclough by the lighthouse contractor from McEntyre's shop in Corclough village. I walked from Belmullet that morning, the 4th December 1947. At the beachhead, I met the boat crew and also the lightkeeper who was coming on duty with me. He was a member of the permanent staff at the lighthouse. When the supplies were placed in the boat, we went on our way. It was a fairly large boat, about twenty feet long by six feet wide. It did not have an engine, just four men rowing with very large oars. An outboard engine would have been a great asset, but that was long before it was introduced...

The sea was quite calm on the particular day I travelled to Eagle Island. It was a step-out landing – we did not have to be winched onto the lighthouse by derrick and bosun's chair. There were two assistant keepers with me. I was still a probationer with only a month's service under my belt. Time passed quickly. I was shown the daily routine and general maintenance of the navigation light, at night keeping it at the correct density, so that its visibility was kept at twenty-one miles. If the visibility dropped to within three or four miles, the fog signal would be put into operation, which consisted of three Crossley engines with air compressors attached. The signal was released at regular intervals through a diaphone mounted on the lighthouse tower. The signal could be heard up to five to ten miles in the distance and, as I was only on temporary duty, I was due to come off Eagle Island on the next relief day. This was officially set at fourteen days, but our relief day came and went with no hope of a boat coming near the lighthouse. In fact, over the Christmas period, a force eight gale was blowing and considerable damage was caused to the lighthouse and other structures. A great storm wall at the seaward side of the lighthouse was breached in several places, and the engine room and outhouses were flooded.

We were in continuous contact by semaphore and morse code with the keepers on land. We had plenty of food supplies. We baked beautiful loaves of bread every other day. There were three large sweet jars for the purpose of making barum, which is similar to sour milk. Barum was made from about twelve skinned potatoes which were thoroughly washed and cleaned, then placed in the large jars with two or three pints of water, corked airtight and left to ferment for up to one week or longer until the liquid turned white. It was customary to borrow a drop of your mate's barum if you considered your own mixture not to be quite ready for baking.

There was a large consignment of reserved provisions kept at all off-shore lighthouses comprising of several dozen tins of stewing steak (bully beef), tins of corned meat, 500 Player's cigarettes, several pounds of tea and sugar and skimmed milk. There was a liberal supply of potatoes in the vegetable store as they had accumulated over a period of time. The principal keeper or, in his stead, the keeper in charge, held the key to the reserved provision store. Whatever was expended or paid for was replenished next boat day.

The bad weather continued all over Christmas and into the New Year. Eventually the weather improved considerably and we finally had our relief boat on the 7th January 1948, nearly five weeks after arriving. The same keepers who had gone ashore in December returned, together with a trainee lightkeeper from the Baily who relieved me. We were

quite happy and in tip-top health after our sojourn, which was not considered unduly long in comparison with other instances when two or three months without a relief boat was common on the west coast of Ireland.

After 49 years at lighthouses, Don said that that first station was the longest that he ever spent on a rock. And he also cited Eagle Island as being *probably the most arduous* of all his assignments.

Michael Francis Sweeny (370) commonly called Frank, arrived on Eagle Island from the Fastnet in the autumn of 1948. Like his father Joseph before him, who had been the principal keeper on Eagle Island in the early 1920s, he was a 'lifer,' serving 35 years from 1936 to 1971. Born at Crookhaven, while his dad was on the Fastnet, he had married Una Harrington in Cork in 1943. He died in Skerries in 1998 aged 87.

Together with the boat contractor, John Gallagher, Frank was interviewed at Scotchport by RTE on 20th June 1949, after having arrived off the Rock. As mentioned, interviews were recorded by cutting a record there and then in the field! These old acetate recordings have now been digitised by RTE. The interviewer was Seamus Ennis.

I see a boat here, Frank, the *Rose of Scotchport*.

This is the boat for the relief of Eagle Island.

That's another boat they're using now, is it?

Ah no, that's an old boat, just a standby in case the other one is broken up on relief days.

Well, this is Scotchport Bay here?

Oh yes, this is Scotchport. In fact, it's very bad here, Scotchport harbour. From the keepers' point of view, it's very bad. We've often a good landing outside at Eagle Island when Scotchport is very bad and the relief boat can't get out.

So, you mean the bay gets rough here?

Oh yes, all broken water.

Yes, you can see the wild (or wide) Atlantic straight out in front of it.

Yes.

Well, tell me, is it considered a bad part of the coast for ocean-going vessels?

It's one of the worst on the Irish coast, this part of the coast here.

Yes. That's why you have your lighthouse out here, I suppose?

Oh yes. That's one of the reasons, really.

Well, tell me, what's it like on Eagle Island when the sea gets up?

In the wintertime, it's very bad. I've been out there this winter now. We've had the sea coming over the lighthouse, right over the island.

And what's the height of it, the height of the lighthouse?

Two hundred and fifty feet high, I think it is.

Some seas!

Oh, desperate seas.

And how do you like being out there in bad weather?

Oh, I don't mind it. I've been quite used to it. I've been on a very bad one before I came here – the Fastnet rock.

Certainly, a bad one.

Oh yes.

Well, you'd get plenty to do in bad weather.

Yes, especially the foggy weather. We get a lot to do in hazy weather and misty weather.

Yes, what was it like out there last weekend when that haze and fog was on here?

Well, we had a lot of fog out there last weekend. Think we had three days going without a stop.

Three days? We heard it here a lot. We had a very fine echo in here on the land too.

Yes, we've three blasts every minute.

At what intervals?

Two seconds flat.

Well, you've a very fine day coming in today and I hope you enjoy the fortnight.

Fortnight ashore and then six weeks on the rock, weather permitting of course.

What's the longest spell you were on?

I was nine weeks last winter.

Some spell indeed. Well, I hope you have a pleasant crossing back again.

Thank you very much.

Ed Fitzgerald (Photo courtesy Gerald Butler)



John Deasy (below)





Two former Eagle Island keepers at Blackhead, co. Antrim. John Connell (left) and George James. John Connell photo courtesy Steve Diamond

(Below) Larry Butler and Pauline Fitzgerald (photos courtesy Gerald Butler)



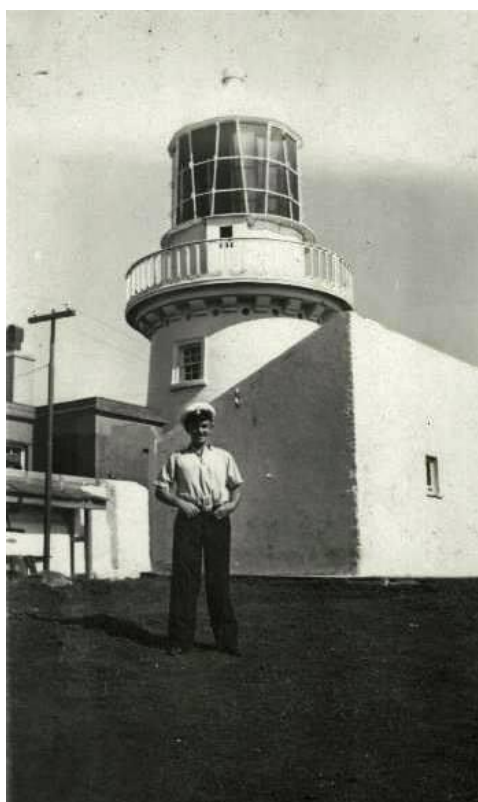


Neil Loughrey (left) and Michael Jones



Don Scanlan with his new wife, Mai Brennan, in 1951

*Vincent Whelan at Inishtrahull (below)
(photo courtesy John Hamilton)*



Arriving in 1949 and serving for three years, **Edward Joseph Cummins (410)** rounds off the list of lightkeepers during the 1940s. Born in Wexford town in 1919, he does not appear to have had a family connection to the light service. He was listed as a 23-year-old foundry worker on his first marriage cert in 1942, though two years later, when Eileen died, he was a keeper on Arranmore Island. As a 28-year-old widower, he married Angela Mooney in Wexford in 1947, while serving on the Tuskar. He retired from the Kish in 1979 and died in 2007.

Eddie was a thirty-year-old assistant keeper when he arrived at the station in 1949. These are the recollections of his eldest son, Jack.

I went out to Eagle Island once. It was Dad's final day on the island, so I would have been about seven years of age. Dad got the boat contractors to agree to bring me out to pick him up. So, we got to the little cove where the boat set out from (Scotchport) and I remember the men looking out at the breakers that came through the gaps at the entrance and saying things like "Jaysus, that would've been close!" There was not enough body in the surf to overturn the boat but it could still sink you as the boat might soon fill up.

Anyway, we rowed over but we couldn't land. It was far too rough. So, the way they did it, the men in the boat, who knew what they were doing, would position the boat a little way off the pier. And there was a wire strung between the island and a rock, and they had a pulley there with a hook on the end of a chain.

First of all, the empty hamper boxes were sent over and these were unhooked and put into a large case. Then it was the turn of the keeper. The men in the boat were all hoping they could hold the boat still long enough to get him in. Dad stood on the hook and held on and he was winched across. But didn't the boat tilt at the last minute and the hook went through the side of the boat. There was water coming in. Luckily the men on the rock were alert to what had happened and winched him up again. That was the first time I ever swore in front of Dad. "Oh shit!" I shouted.

I remember looking up the cliffs to the lighthouse and tiny houses and wondering how on earth they ever built anything on that island.

Dad's father had been a big noise in Rosslare Harbour. Dad worked in Pearse's steelworks foundry in Wexford during WW1, making red post boxes for England. But he knew it wasn't for him. So, he wrote to the Gardai and Irish Lights looking for work and said whichever answered first, he'd go for. And so he became a lightkeeper.

He served on Tuskar, Fastnet and Loop Head (amongst others) before arriving at Eagle. His wife (my mam) died nine days after giving birth to me on Arranmore Island. The doctor couldn't get across from the mainland in time. He married again and served at the Baily and Tuskar before spending fourteen years on the Kish.

He told me one time a story, I've no idea how true it was, about being marooned on Eagle over Christmas. (It must have been the same Christmas that my relations in Wexford sent up a Christmas present for me. Only didn't it get slightly damaged in the post and my step-mum told me not to open it in case my Dad said it had to be sent back. So I waited and waited, and each day the hole in the box got larger and larger as I stuck my finger in it trying to see what it was. And I'd be asking, when is Dad coming home. And all, I knew, it was a bloody long time. Eventually, he got home and I could open it. It was a train set.)

Anyhow, Dad was on the island and the reliefs were overdue, I don't know how long, and they were down to their tinned rations, corned beef, mutton, that sort of thing. And one of the keepers on the island had a father who was a butcher and he knew about killing animals and preparing them for eating. So there were a load of sheep on the island and they used the semaphore to ask the farmer if they could kill one of the sheep and eat it, and that Irish Lights would recompense the farmer for his loss. And the farmer said yes, that wasn't a problem, but they had to save the fleece for him. And that was agreed and they dined on fresh mutton instead of the tinned variety.

The dwellings for Irish Lights were in Corclough. We lived next door to Dixon's where you got your bread and milk and other groceries. Opposite us was the Gallagher's house, the ones who had the boat tender. My dad used to tell a story of him passing the house one evening and seeing Mrs. Gallagher.

'Lovely day, Mr. Cummins,' said she to him.

'Ah, it'll rain tomorrow,' said Dad.

'Ah, I don't think so,' she says. 'What makes you say that, anyway?'

Dad pointed up at a rooster on the straw roof of the Gallagher's house. 'He's facing west,' he said. 'That means rain's on the way.'

Dad was only having her on, having a bit of a laugh with her but anyway, it actually did rain the following day, quite unexpectedly. And for a long time after that, people used to look up and see which way the rooster was facing in order to see if it would rain or not!

Some places we stayed were lonely places but not Corclough. That was mainly due to the local people who were the nicest, friendliest people you could meet. You could come home and there'd be a sack in your front porch and there'd be a live chicken in it that somebody had given you. We used to put an envelope in the window if we had a letter that we wanted the postman to collect. If there was no envelope, it would save him from getting off the bike.

Forty years later, Dad and my step-mum and my sister went back to Corclough and saw Mrs. Dixon working in her garden. Mrs. Dixon looked up at the car and called out, 'Ah, hello, Mrs. Cummins, how are you?' as if it was only yesterday that she'd seen them. Of course, there was a load of hugging and chatting afterwards!

The 1940s

Despite the fact that no boats were wrecked in the vicinity of Eagle Island in the 1940s, nevertheless, the weather seemed determined to maintain its reputation for unrelenting fury. As we have already seen, the relief boat was unable to land for over two months at the start of 1943 due to stormy seas and John F. Connell was one of the keepers stranded on the island for 77 days.

Four years later, on January 11th 1947, the *Ballina Herald* was reporting that *tempestuous weather and hills of sea rolling in* were preventing the relief of three men marooned on Eagle Island. Frankly, it wasn't much of a story as the men were only a week overdue.

Three days later, the *Irish Independent* helpfully gave the names of the three keepers who were stranded. They were *Edward Fitzgerald, his son, Edward and Daniel Coughlan*, a triumvirate that at least shows that bodies were thin on the ground at the time. Edward was of course the PK but his son was only eighteen years of age at the time and was probably filling in for somebody. Having grown up in the lighthouse environment, he would have been well able. The same would have applied to Daniel Coughlan. Although not officially listed at Eagle, he was in fact serving at Blackrock Mayo at the time. Doubtless he was the keeper ashore there, living at Blacksod, and had been drafted in as cover. The Coughlan name had been synonymous with the Fastnet ever since the construction of the first edifice on that rock in 1854 and indeed, Daniel was to be transferred to the 'family home' the following year!

There was some more marooning – obviously a popular North Mayo pastime – in August of that year, as the *Ballina Herald* reported under the headlines, *Tales of the Sea – Marooned on Eagle Island*, which sounds rather like a review of a new Enid Blyton adventure.

In a tranquil sea and sweltering sunshine early on Friday last, a group of ladies, enjoying the breezes of the Atlantic at Frenchport, took advantage of an invitation by two fishermen to board their curragh and were swiftly rowed to Eagle Island where they intended to spend the day and be rowed ashore in the evening as the curragh crew were returning to their port. The party were Mrs. Duggan, wife of the principal lightkeeper on the island with her two children Doris and Hugo, aged 5 and 9 years; Mrs. Murphy, whose husband, Mr. Sean Murphy, is also a lightkeeper attached to the staff at Eagle Island; and Miss Agnes Coyle, aged 15 years, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Edwd. Coyle of Tonamace, Belmullet.

On Friday evening, by the time the currach had reached the island to take the visitors off, the swells were whirling round the landing stage and consequently the fishermen were forced to race their craft with a rising gale in a boisterous sea to the nearest creek on the rugged mainland coast, leaving the ladies and children to their fate on the wave-lashed territory off the North coast of Erris. Saturday's storm again intensified the violence of the sea. Sunday brought even worse conditions and Monday's weather was none better.

By the time of writing on Tuesday, writes our Erris representative, the party are still marooned, but if the weather moderates, it is expected they will get ashore this evening. The husbands of Mrs. Duggan and Mrs. Murphy are with them on the island and Miss Coyle, who is thoroughly conversant with the art of semaphoning, – sic – flagged a message ashore on Sunday evening to Mr. Peter Williams, emergency signalman for the island, wishing her parents to be assured that she is well and safe, having plenty of food and sleeping accommodation and enjoying a marvellous time watching the mountainous seas pounding against the lofty cliffs.

One might well wonder how the lighthouse, well-equipped with a state-of-the-art wireless beacon and a qualified mechanic to mind it, was still reliant on the ancient art of semaphore flags when it came to communication with the mainland. The semaphorist in Gladree, Peter Williams, was of course one of the crew of the lighthouse tender.

There was more marooning in January 1949, this time due to *tempestuous weather and mountainous seas*. Three keepers, announced the *Ballina Herald* on 29th of the month, had been marooned for eleven weeks on the island that wasn't really an island. They were Hugh Duggan, PK, Frank Sweeny and **Dominick Gaughan**. Again, the latter does not appear

in the official listing and, given the very Erris surname, may well have been a temporary keeper.

It is upwards of ten weeks since a relief boat has reached the wave-washed outpost and... there is no indication of any abatement in weather conditions anxiously awaited for the relief of the marooned keepers.

During three days of last week, the lamp tower, which is 300 feet above sea-level – give or take 100 feet presumably – was continually washed over by clouds of spray and at times the whole island was invisible to the people on the mainland.

In normal weather, there is a boat service from the mainland every fortnight and during the past eleven weeks, several attempts were made, but the swells are so fiercely lashing around the island's lofty cliffs that a landing was wholly impossible.

There is a conserved supply of hard rations on the island but the shortage of vegetables and tobacco is felt the greatest hardship. It would seem that all the goats had been eaten at this stage.

In October 1949, the *Connaught Telegraph* was reporting that the Irish Lights tender, S.S. *Granuaile* had spent the past month discharging building materials for Eagle Island and Blacksod lighthouses. In a four-day period alone, she discharged 150 tons of lime, sand and cement at the island, which would have necessitated transportation up the bockety steps and then the slope to the lighthouse enclosure. Unfortunately, we are not told what was being built, though maybe the storms throughout the decade necessitated some repairs. Men were recruited from Corclough West and Tonamace for the job, under the supervision of a Mr. McCullagh, the supervising engineer. Due to the absence of any other safe harbour at night, the tender travelled back to the harbour at Inver, opposite Ballyglass, every evening.

The paper also reported that the four shore dwellings for the keepers at Corclough West were to be renovated and skilled labourers had already been recruited for the job.

The following month, the death was reported of 79-year-old Dr. Austen Studdart, who had lived and worked in the Belmullet area since 1906. Alongside his work as medical officer for the Erris peninsula, he also was the point of call for the keepers and their families of the four Mullet lighthouses – Eagle, Blackrock, Blacksod and Ballyglass – and doubtless was well-known to all and sundry. It was said that practically every car in Erris joined the funeral cortege to pay their respects.

The last month of the decade arrived and fittingly there was one final bout of marooning on Eagle Island before the 1950s took over the shift. This time it was neither the keepers nor their spouses but the workmen recruited from Corclough West and Tonamace to carry out the building works on the island. They were stranded due to 'rough seas' and, because rations could not be landed, strict rationing had been introduced. One hopes that the lightkeepers had the good grace to share out their emergency rations – yes, even the cigarettes – with the workmen.



Eagle Island 1908

World War 2

Ireland, or at least the twenty-six counties south of the border, was neutral during the Second World War, or 'The Emergency' as we laconically described it. This was not to say that the country was unaffected by the carnage in practically every other part of Europe. Many Irishmen fought and died for the Allies during the period and many more travelled to England to help the war effort in factories or on the land. Food shortages and strict rationing became the order of the day, as ships and boats of all sizes and shapes travelled across the Atlantic and from many far-flung places with urgently-needed supplies of food and other goods to help alleviate the shortages being experienced in Ireland and Britain.

It was not long after the outbreak of the war in 1939 that the North Atlantic became a major battleground with German U-boats patrolling Ireland's western seaboard in an attempt to disrupt this vital supply chain¹⁵. Even as early as October 1939, a mere month after Britain's declaration of war against Germany, a British submarine, H33, was said to be patrolling the area around Eagle Island and the Inniskeas, looking for German submarines.

Look-out posts (L.O.P.s) were established all around the Irish coast from Carlingford Lough to Malin Head, small, concrete huts of little architectural merit. Eagle Island was roughly midway between the L.O.P.s at Annagh Head (61) and Erris Head (62). They were manned by members of the Local Defence Force, who recorded everything they saw in a series of ledgers which are available to view on the Military Archives website. The Annagh Head post, under NCO J. Fallon, was manned by T. Carey, M. Cawley, A. Gilboy, P. Kilker, J. Lavelle, M. Lavelle, S. McAndrew, AJ O'Malley and A. Reilly, amongst others, who noted down trawlers heading north or unidentified boats heading south, as the case arose.

But by and large, the action took place far offshore. Submarine technology had come on in leaps and bounds since the First World War and the U-Boats were now able to prowls around far into the Atlantic, sometimes to the coast of America looking for prey. With the Allies' supply ships generally heading for British ports at Liverpool or Glasgow, they would not normally be seen from the Erris shore, keeping to well-established channels much further out. Thus, whereas Eagle Island was frequently mentioned in despatches with reference to the location of sinkings, it was always far from the bombs and smoke and drownings, just as it was in the First World War. '*240 miles NNW of Eagle Island*,' '*95 miles West of Eagle Island*' etc – with no landmarks in the ocean, Eagle was often the nearest land to a point of conflict.

One of these engagements, though, far out in the Atlantic, was to provide assistant keeper Willie Roche with one of the most memorable moments of his career.

The *San Demetrio* was one of 38 ships travelling in Convoy HX84 from Nova Scotia to the United Kingdom. She was carrying 11,200 tons of aviation fuel and, en route, the tanker was attacked by a German U-boat and set on fire. Due to her highly inflammable cargo, the crew took to the lifeboats immediately and paddled away as fast as they could.

Two of the lifeboats were picked up and their crews brought to Newfoundland. The sixteen men in the third lifeboat drifted for 24 hours before they came across a burning ship. To their surprise, they found it was their own! However, due to strong winds and the danger of the fuel

¹⁵ For a more detailed account of how Mayo was affected by the war off her shores, please see Anthony Hickey's wonderfully researched '*Mayo and the Battle of the North Atlantic (1939-45)*' at mayo.me

exploding, they did not board, which they regretted later, as a sudden wintry gale blew up during their second night adrift. At dawn the following day, they located the *San Demetrio* again and this time boarded her and managed to put out the fire.

They had no charts, no radio and no navigational equipment, but very occasional glimpses of the sun enabled them to plot a course eastwards. After seven days at the mercy of gales and U-boats, they approached land but had no idea where they were. On Eagle Island, they were spotted by assistant keeper Willie Roche and, in 1973, he recounted the day in *Beam: The Journal of the Irish Lighthouse Service Volume 5 No.2* under the title *A Day to Remember*.

I remember seeing a film a number of years ago entitled 'A Night to Remember' – that of course was the story of the unsinkable liner 'Titanic,' which struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic on her maiden voyage with the loss of numerous lives including many Irish.

However, my day to remember is about another ship, the tanker 'San Demetrio.' At midday, on the 13th November 1940 (the reason why I remember the time so accurately is because I had just changed the fog signal recorder chart, which is changed each day at noon on all compressor fog signal stations) I took my usual stroll around the back of the fog signal house, which faces westwards and there, to my astonishment and amazement, I found myself looking right down on the decks of what was then a massive oil tanker. I stood there as if my feet were glued to the rock for at least fifteen minutes. The day was quite good skywards, the wind north-west force four, with the usual westerly swell which invariably pounds the rocks of stubborn Eagle Island. The principal keeper and the other assistant were at this time attending to the derricks and running gear at the boat landing. This checking of gear had to be done constantly owing to the spray flying over the island.

I was the Peggy – naturally, being the boy – I had just been appointed to Eagle Island. For the benefit of those who are not familiar with such terms as 'Peggy,' let me explain. It simply means general rouseabout or general factotum. One of my duties was to keep an eye on the dinner simmering on the cooker, keeping everything in ship-shape, spick and span in the Sacred of Sacred's kitchen. I ran down within hailing distance of my mates and shouted 'Ship in Distress!' The assistant was first to hear my shout. He dropped all his tools of office and took to his scrapers towards me, closely followed by the PK, who was clipping the heels of the man in front of him and I can tell you that Ronnie Delaney had nothing on those two gentlemen.

The PK's first remark when he got his breath back was 'this is no time for joking.' The expression on my face answered that remark. The three of us took up our vantage point, looking down at this mysterious heap of metal. Little did we realise then that we were looking down on one of the greatest dramas and episodes being carried out at sea during the war.

It was quite obvious that she had been through a rough time but we, of course, knew nothing of that at this stage. It is not easy to describe the condition of the ship but what I write I clearly remember.

She had a small plaque with the words 'San Demetrio' painted with gold lettering under her bridge or, should I be precise and say, 'where her bridge used to be.' She had quite a heavy list to port and on her quarter was written with dripping white paint 'S.O.S.' and 'Help.' Everything on deck seemed to be destroyed by fire, the wheelhouse was completely

gutted, riggings and spars were just a charred mess. Three men were gripped to the steering wheel down aft and it was quite apparent that their job of keeping the ship steady was a difficult task. It was obviously hand gear. In my mind, and I am sure I can speak for the other two men, there was no doubt that she was desperately in need of assistance...

During the war, we had very stringent instructions as regarding communicating with ships or aircraft in the vicinity. In fact, the short, sharp instructions read 'No visual signals whatsoever to be communicated from ship to shore or vice versa.' I would hastily add here that there had been reports of German submarines and German aircraft in the area for some time. The other assistant and myself were slightly impetuous and suggested to signal the ship as we were convinced at this stage that they did not know where they were. The PK insisted that the rules be carried out and no signal would be given. Looking back now, I can see how perfectly right he was. He did his job well.

The last we saw of the 'San Demetrio' that day was rounding Blackrock at 16.40 hours but we did see her again a day or two afterwards, being escorted by a destroyer and a tug heading northwards. That evening, we saw two German aircraft in the area again and it brought it home to us how right the PK had been. Our signal could have been spotted by the German aircraft and we could have been blown to atoms which, I understand, was the fate of one of the English stations.

Shortly afterwards, we had a visit from our Inspector and a round table conference was held, each man giving his own opinion and the Inspector's final remark was 'You should have used your own discretion.'

My reply to that was, 'We did, Sir,'

We did have our own bush communication between station and shore and, believe me, neither the German Naval Command or the British Admiralty could conquer or break down this code. It would take too much time to go into the nitty-gritty aspects of this code but I can state it was most effective with a full guarantee that only the two people engaged in the code – one on each side of the water – could interpret the message, and it was impossible for anyone else, either from land or sea, to get the message. Marconi was known worldwide for his invention of radio but we on Eagle Island conveyed our messages just as effectively without recognition, for only the seagulls knew. This is what I meant when I told the Inspector that we did use our own discretion. The S.O.S. was sent through the 'right' channels. It was through this message that a tug and a destroyer were sent to 'San Demetrio's' assistance.

A film was made later about this episode entitled 'San Demetrio London.' I saw the film. I am afraid it did not give the personnel on Eagle Island a great boost and I often wonder since, did any of those five brave men know that we did answer their call and send assistance.

I am now based in Mizen Head, helping in my own small way with my three mates, bringing the largest tankers afloat into Bantry Bay, some of them carrying three hundred thousand tons, and often my thoughts go back to the 'San Demetrio,' a mere fifteen-thousand-ton ship, large by those days' standards. How times have advanced – or have they?

Beneath this piece, the *Beam* editor had written – *This article is the result of an enquiry sent to the three keepers who were on Eagle Island when the ‘San Demetrio’ was sighted. I am glad to record that both Mr. J.M. Trant and Mr. W. Coupe also took the trouble to give their accounts of the event and I am most grateful for their corroboration.*

But although Erris saw little in the way of bloody engagements, the local people often had to deal with their aftermath. The first body to be washed up came ashore in Blacksod Bay in spring 1940. It was found by a 15-year-old schoolboy. It was the first of many. In the second half of 1940, a total of 51 bodies were retrieved from the sea along the Mayo coastline, many in severe stages of decomposition. Many more were seen but were unable to be retrieved and were swept back out to sea or sank. Men waded out in strong seas to retrieve bodies and give them a decent burial in local graveyards such as Termoncarragh. Nationality was immaterial – all were victims.

In 1940, the vast majority of the bodies washed up were from the *Arandora Star*. At the outbreak of hostilities, German nationals living in Britain were rounded up and placed in camps in case they might be spies. When Italy joined in, the Italians suffered a similar fate. Very soon, the camps were overcrowded and it was decided to ship the males across the Atlantic.

In late June or early July 1940 – the exact date is still in dispute – the *Arandora Star*, a large passenger liner, left Liverpool bound for Canada. On board were 479 German internees (including a number of Jewish refugees), 734 Italian internees, 86 German prisoners-of-war and 200 military guards. There was no escort and, when 75 miles west of Bloody Foreland on the north westerly tip of Donegal, she was sunk by a single torpedo from U-47. In all, 868 people were rescued but 805 did not make it. Northwesterly currents meant that many of the bodies were carried towards Ireland, where they began washing up in July and August.

One of the crew of the *Arandora Star*, who survived the sinking, was 21-year-old quartermaster, Jim Leyden. Born and reared at Rosses Point in Sligo, the sea was always in his blood and he joined the Merchant Navy at the outbreak of the war.

I was asleep on the Arandora Star when I heard a terrific explosion, which threw me on the floor of my cabin. The liner listed as I made for the door, and outside I could hear shouts rising to a terrible roar as the scrabble for boats began, he is quoted as saying in the *Sligo Champion* of 13th July 1940.

He helped to launch three boats and, with the sea running down the deck, threw a raft overboard and dived in. *The sea was filled with struggling figures and overloaded boats were making away as fast as they could from beneath the towering bulk of the liners side,* he said. *I clambered on the raft and no sooner had I done so then the ship gave a final plunge and sank. A tremendous frothing wave arose over the place where she had gone down and, as it swept towards me, I clung desperately to the raft. Although I held on like grim death with both hands, the force on the rushing water broke my hold and I felt myself being carried down beneath the surface. I struggled like mad and then my head once more was above the surface.*

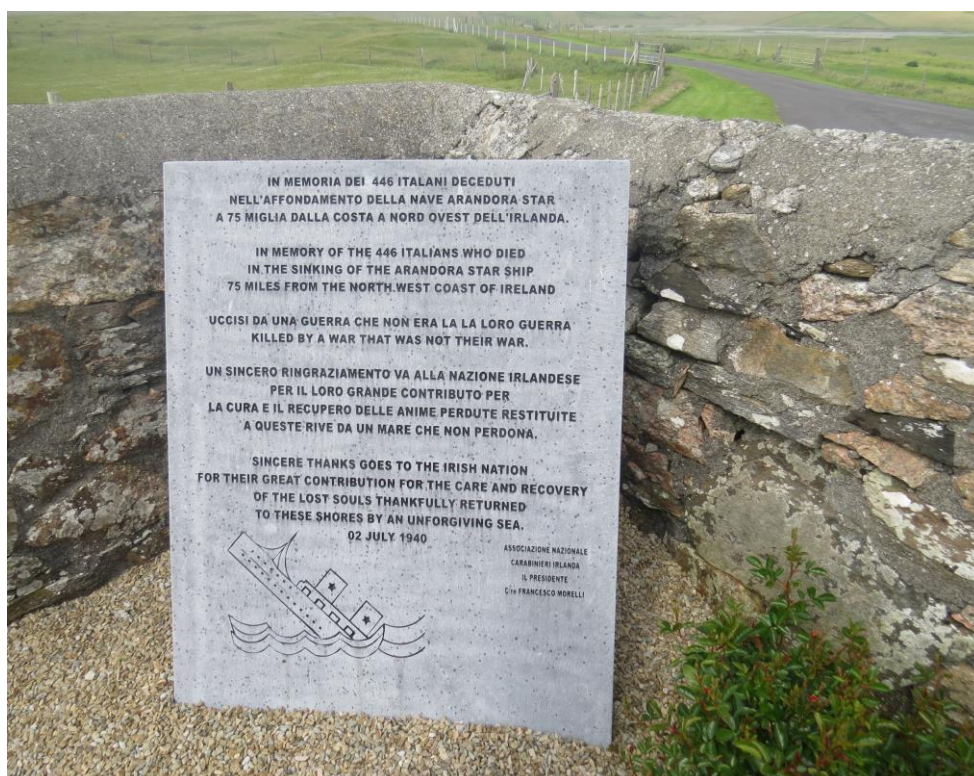
I swam to a large piece of timber and rested on it for a while before I left it for a raft on which two other members of the crew were perched. It was difficult to hold on in the heavy seas but we managed to do so for two hours.

Spread all over the sea, we could see the other survivors and then when we had almost given up hope an aeroplane appeared and circled over our heads. After another long wait, destroyers rushed across the horizon and the navy men lost no time in picking up the exhausted survivors.

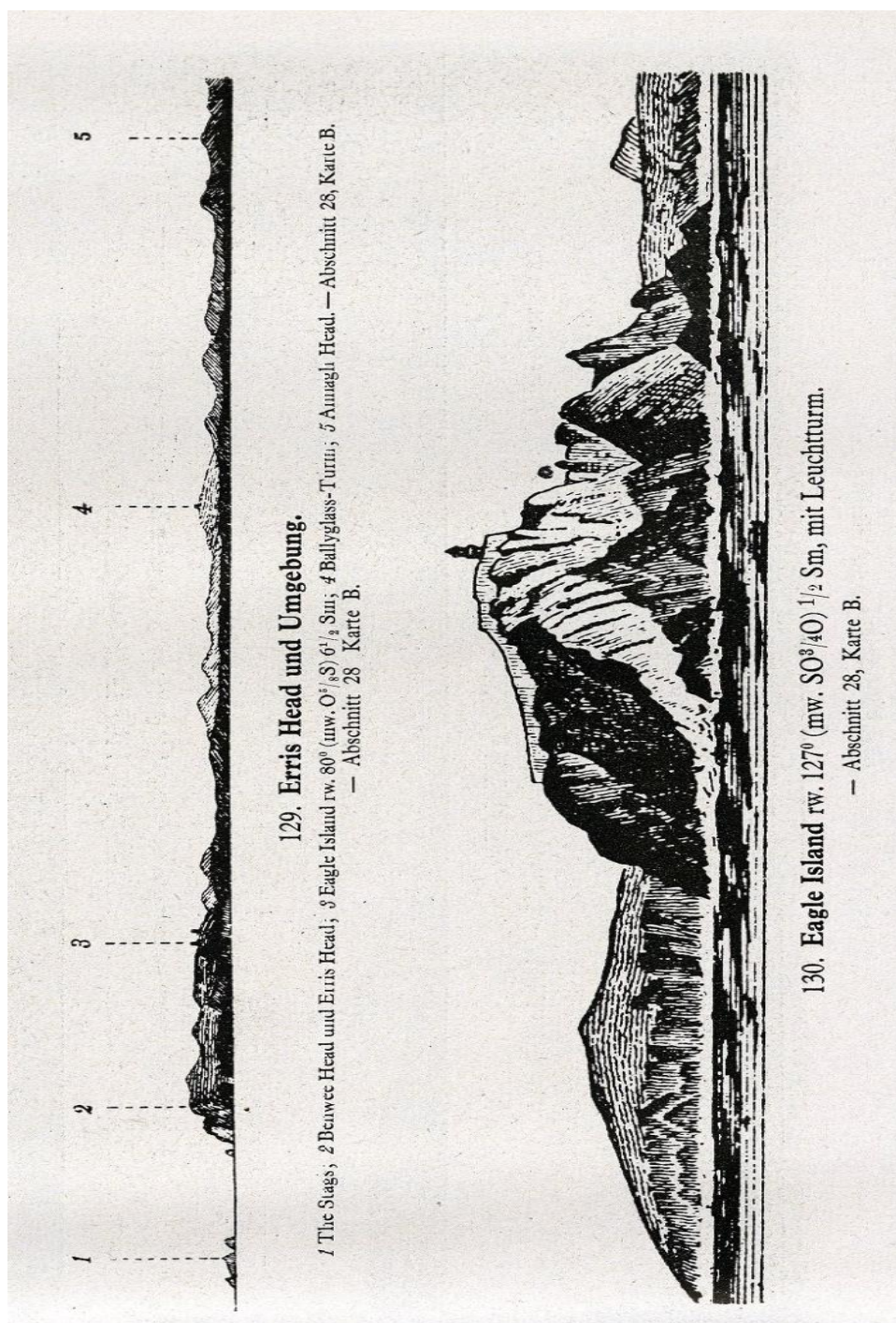
Rumours soon began to spread about the circumstances of such a large loss of life. Many of the Italians and Germans had been prevented at gunpoint from accessing the decks, even though most of them had actually come to England to escape the rise of fascism in their own countries.

Jim later became a lightkeeper, serving as principal keeper at Eagle Island. We will meet him again in due course.

As the war continued, more and more British and German aircraft were seen flying over the Erris shoreline, using the lighthouses on Blackrock and Eagle Island as markers. One of these in August 1940 was a German Fw300 Condor. Earlier that day, a British coal ship, the S.S. *Macville*, with a cargo from Newcastle, was attempting to scoot down the west coast of Ireland to Limerick. She had joined a transatlantic convoy heading west but naturally had to leave it to access her destination. She made straight for Eagle Island. Passing it, she was just a half a mile from Blackrock lighthouse when she was spotted by the Condor. It raked the ship with gunfire, killing the only Irishman aboard, Paddy Colbert from Tramore, before it was hit by the ship's anti-aircraft gun. The assumption, never proved, was this was the same Fw Condor that crash landed in Kerry a few hours later.



Plaque in Termoncarragh graveyard commemorating the 446 Italian prisoners of war who died in the Arandora Star disaster



Two views of the north Erris shoreline published by the German High Command in 1941 designed to give U-boat personnel an idea of where exactly they were when viewing the Irish mainland through a periscope. These are just two in a series of such sketches of Ireland's western seaboard and are "No. 129 Erris Head und Umgebung" (surroundings) and "No.130 Eagle Island."

In the midst of all this, it is difficult to know what constituted the role of the lightkeepers on Eagle Island. Without access to the journals in Irish Lights, we do not know if they were privately told to report any German U-boat or aircraft activity. Naturally we were neutral but, as with the famous weather forecasts from Blacksod that were so instrumental in the success of the Normandy landings, it would hardly strain credulity if German military activity was secretly being leaked to the Allies command force.

Did any bodies wash up on Eagle Island? There is no record of this happening and, to be fair, if there were any, they would probably have washed up on the inaccessible west coast of the island. One assumes they would have notified the Local Defence Force, via semaphore, of course, if this were the case.

Flora

This will probably be one of the shorter chapters in the book!

The predominant botanical species on the island is grass, more specifically, grass of the green variety, the same sort that skirts the N17, according to the Saw Doctors. Coincidentally, that particular Mayo landmark, like Eagle Island, also features stone walls.

In 1884, Daniel Hawkins described the grass as short and stunted and not sufficient to provide cover or shelter for birds.

Sean Doyle of the Lough Ree Sub Aqua Club, visiting in August 2020, remarked that the terrain was very soft underfoot with a lot of moss.

There are no trees nor bushes nor shrubs. In the springtime, *after the island has had a good washing*, says Fergus Sweeney, the sea pinks that Josie Corish yearned for after her removal to Blacksod in 1895, still take over the island. Andy Newman recalled that the island was, and presumably still is, a great place for the mushrooms, with keepers rushing to get them early in the morning.

There was also a walled garden further down the slope, easily visible from the mainland, the wall protecting the keepers' home-grown vegetables from the cyclonic sea-breezes that frequently scorched the island. This is the square shape at the bottom of the island when viewed from the mainland. In many accounts, it is referred to as the 'small' walled garden but it is actually a lot larger than it looks.

It is not known how productive this oasis of horticulture was – it was certainly not in use in the later years of occupancy.

It is said that a section of this garden also housed a small graveyard with at least one infant buried there, presumably from the time when families were resident on the rock. Gerry Sweeney, when there in the late eighties, says that he looked but could find no trace of anything that could have marked the site of a grave. It is probable that most infants were buried there prior to the families being moved ashore in early 1895, their exact location at one time being marked by a rough stone, probably without any, or with very little, inscriptions. It was a sad fact of the lightkeeper's life that, once the families were transferred, graves of children, like those on Eagle and other rock stations, would never have been visited by the families again.



Sea pinks below the East tower June 2023 (photo by Chris McDaid)



Looking back towards Cross Island and the mainland (photo courtesy Frank Pelly)

The 1950s

Stormy seas

The Fleetwood trawler *Red Archer* put into Killybegs with an injured crew member. Seaman Johnson (20) a native of Fleetwood had broken his leg while fishing off Eagle Island. After treatment, the injured man was sent to Shiel Hospital in Ballyshannon – *Irish Press*, Monday 2nd July 1956

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
Hugh Duggan	1947-51		Michael O'Connor	1945-50
Walter Coupe	1951-54		Michael Sweeney	1948-56
Jack Roche	1954-62		Edward Cummins	1949-52
			John Stapleton	1950-57
			Ted Hawkins	1952-55
SAK / Temp			Robert Polly	1955
Peter Kilker	1950		John Gallagher	1956-61
Coughlan	1952		Leonard Stocker	1956-63
Frank O'Farrell	Late 50s		James Leyden	1957-60

As we met Walter Coupe when he came to the island as an assistant keeper in 1930, we will move straight on to **John Joseph Roche (348)** – Jack – who spent eight years as principal keeper on the rock between 1954 and 1962.

For Jack, it was a sort of homecoming, having been born at Corclough West when his father, Michael, was an assistant keeper there between 1907 and 1912. His brother William had served on the Eagle between 1939 and 1942 so doubtless John was well clued in on what to expect when he arrived in 1954. He had married Skerries girl Agnes McNally nineteen previously when he was living in Castletownbere, having presumably met her when stationed at Rockabill. It was reported in the *Mayo News* in 1957 that Jack's departure from the area was imminent, but he remained until 1962, when he was transferred to Rathlin O'Beirne, his mother's native area.

Assistant Keeper **John J. Stapleton (440 or 456)** spent an inordinate amount of time on Eagle Island. His first stint lasted from 1950-57, his second from 1960-65, making a total of twelve years, a total probably unequalled since the old Ballast Board days pre-1869. (John Gallagher would beat him though) Commonly called Jackie, he was the son of lightkeeper Jack Stapleton and brother of keepers Jim and Joe. His grandfather was Master of the Kish lightship, and his great-grandfather was a lightkeeper too. Jackie spent much of his time at Blacksod and married a local girl, June Heneghan. He died in 2009.

Edward J. 'Ted' Hawkins (418) was assistant keeper between 1952 and 1955, replacing another Edward (Cummins.) Born in Castletownbere in 1921, he was the son of Daniel

Hawkins and had married Mary McAndrew in 1947 while living at Blacksod (and probably working on Blackrock, where he was marooned the following year.)

In later years, Ted was a keen golfer, playing the nearby Carne course, where he was club captain until well into his eighties. He also ran a ladies and children's clothing store for many years.

I loved it, he is quoted as saying in John Garrity's 2009 Ancestral Voices in relation to living on Eagle. Summertime was lovely, you couldn't find a nicer place. In mushroom season, all you had to do was take a pan out, pick a bunch of mushrooms and fry 'em up.

He experienced storms, though none of the really devastating ones. But they took precautions, tying a rope between the living quarters and the tower when a storm was due. *Anything left outside would be broken to bits and washed out by the sea. I saw three-by-three Yorkshire flagstones lifted up and thrown ten yards.*

Five years was the time allotted to local man **John Patrick Gallagher (486)** to spend at Eagle Island. He was there from 1956 to 1961. 'Local' is something of an understatement, for John was the son of Nora Gallagher, who had taken over the boat tender for the lighthouse in 1951 when John's father (also John) died. Born in Corclough in January 1934, he joined Irish Lights in March 1952, aged eighteen years. He was made assistant keeper in October 1954 and, after a relatively short stint at St. John's Point, co. Down, he joined Eagle Island on 24th January 1956. Doubtless there was some slugging when his brother rowed him over the first time in his shiny new Irish Lights uniform.

He stayed for five years and was then transferred to Slyne Head in January 1961. His second spell on the rock started on 16th June 1972 and four years and six months later, he departed on promotion to principal keeper of the Fastnet.

Nine months later, on 16th September 1977, he made the return journey and stayed for nine years, which was a long time, possibly attributable to the ever-encroaching automation and redundancies in Irish Lights.

All in all, he served for 18½ years on Eagle, certainly the longest at the station in the twentieth century and quite possibly the longest of all time. A lover of reading and sport – he was a keen Manchester United supporter – he was also proficient in carpentry and produced many fine examples of furniture. Sadly, he died in the lantern of the Tuskar lighthouse in 1989.

Leonard C. Stocker (471) – Lenny – was one of the last of a family of Stockers that had kept the light since at least 1818, when Edward Stocker was stationed on the Tuskar Rock. His father, Cecil, had been born at Corclough, when his father, Leonard served there as an AK. Leonard returned to the island as principal keeper in 1917. Leonard C.'s father, Cecil, and his wife, Eileen, were doubtless responsible for giving their son the unusual middle name Columbia in 1929, long before it became popularised in the *Rocky Horror Show*. He joined the North Mullet community on 8th October 1956 from the Old Head of Kinsale and spent seven years there, leaving at Hallowe'en 1963 for the Skelligs. He was promoted to principal keeper in 1975 and retired on medical grounds in 1988.

Which only leaves **James 'Jim' Leyden (405)** who had been on board the *Arandora Star* when she was sunk by a German U-Boat in 1940. A native of Grange, county Sligo, the sea was in his family's blood. Rosaleen Ferguson, a native of nearby Coney Island had been born with a caul over her head – a thin membrane-like skin, which was supposed to ward

off death by drowning – and Jim Leyden had been given a piece of this. It was said that this piece of caul saved him from drowning when 805 others died in the 1940 sinking.

After the sinking, Jim joined Irish Lights as a keeper, though the *Arandora Star* tragedy seems never to have left him. Gerald Butler in his memoir, *The Lightkeeper*, describes how Jim, while principal keeper of the Fastnet in 1970, would *stand on the balcony, motionless, gazing far out to sea, lost in his thoughts, as if he was carrying the world on his shoulders or visiting some dark corner of his mind.*

Jim joined the Eagle Island team as assistant keeper for three years from 1957 to 1960. As mentioned, he was PK on the Fastnet from 1970 to 1972 and then transferred to Eagle Island again, this time as PK. Sadly he was only a few weeks in the job when, along with two others he was drowned trying to retrieve a boat on the rocks of Blackrock lighthouse in his beloved Sligo. It is not known if he still had the piece of caul at the time.

One keeper we can definitely place on Eagle Island in the late fifties was **Francis J. ‘Frank’ O’Farrell (517)** although, due to the disinterested book-keeping in Irish Lights at the time, the travels of the Supernumerary Assistant Keeper was not recorded.

Waterford-born Frank was born in 1934 and, after a spell in the Merchant Navy in England, joined Irish Lights in 1956. Four years later, he was made assistant keeper and was appointed PK in 1980 whilst on the Kish. Frank retired on medical grounds in 1985 and died in 2012.



Two photos of a young PJ Gallagher (right in both pics) on Eagle Island at the railings next to the engine room. Jack Roche is the PK in both pics. Possibly Lenny Stocker in the white shirt. Other AK – Jim Leyden? (photo courtesy of Anthony Gallagher)



Lenny Columbia Stocker (above)



Jack Roche (above) on the Kish

Below, a young Frank O'Farrell (photo courtesy Seamus O'Farrell)



Below, Jim Leyden



The 1950s

Evidently the Eagle Island keepers of the new decade were determined to maintain the reputation built up by their predecessors for being stuck on the rock. However, in their haste they couldn't quite figure out who was marooned and for how long.

The Western People of February 11th 1950 reported that *boisterous seas and inclement weather* had frustrated the relief boat's endeavours to put out from Scotchport for the past nine days.

A week later, the paper reported that *mountainous seas* were still preventing the relief of the three men, whom they named as Michael O'Connor, Frank Sweeny and Peter Kilker, the auxiliary. They were now twelve days overdue.

A further week later, it announced to a breathless world that the three keepers had been relieved the previous Sunday after being fourteen days overdue. *Principal Keeper Duggan, accompanied by assistants Frank Sweeney and Michael Connor came ashore from Eagle Island lighthouse at the Belmullet coast ... they rowed themselves ashore when they noticed that the seas had temporarily abated. Luckily, they had experienced no shortage of food.*

As Dougal would say, *I'm very confused, Ted*. Firstly, three experienced keepers rowed back from the mainland leaving an auxiliary on his own out there during a temporary abatement of the weather? What would have happened if the weather had picked up again, preventing Ed Cummins (the keeper ashore) from getting out? I'm sure there would have been hell to pay from Irish Lights if that had got out.

Secondly, Hugh Duggan was not listed as being overdue relief in the 18th February report, so why did he come back and not poor Peter Kilker?

I am hoping that the train of events was down to the story being confused in its telling to the *Western People* reporter.

An *Irish Press* report of 21st February 1951 listed Eagle Island as one of eight lighthouses that had been fitted with radio-telephone. This meant that any keeper getting sick on the rock would not have to wait for a passing boat to take him off, or hope the weather was clear enough to allow for semaphore. It was a two-edged sword though in that Head Office at Irish Lights could now check with the keepers at any time, day or night, to make sure everything was in order.

According to Irish Lights, it was the war that had prevented lighthouses from keeping up with modern technology and their engineers were now working hell-for-leather to catch up. It was hoped that the remaining 70 lighthouses would soon be installed with the new device.

In the approach to Christmas that year, the *Irish Press* demonstrated how easy it was for Eagle Island to message Head Office now the radio-telephone had been installed.

The message is relayed by radio-phone to Blackrock (Mayo), it wrote, over to Rathlin O'Beirne, over to Mizen Head, over to Fastnet, then to the Daunt Lightship (which is one of the most important lights off Europe), over to Conynbeg, Tuskar, then the Kish, then headquarters. As they say, what could possibly go wrong?

The men were also linked by radio-phone to their families on shore which would have been much appreciated at Christmas.

In the 19th December article – headed *Lightmen's Christmas made more comfortable this year* – we were informed of some of the treats in store for keepers during the festive season.

In the week leading up to the big day, the supply ships would be taking off those keepers due to spend Christmas ashore that year. Weather permitting.

Those people who worked Christmas Day could expect to be home for the New Year's festivities. Weather permitting.

The post-war period had brought better iron rations to the men on the rock stations. By *iron rations*, they did not mean iron supplements but rather 'tinned goods.' The best quality of tinned food, soups, fish and fruit were again on the *pound and pint list* to be used as emergency rations.

Other organisations kept the keepers in mind at Christmas, particularly the 'Flying Angel' offices of the Mission to Seamen headquarters on Eden Quay. Annual comforts were sent directly by relief ships from Dublin.

Christmas trees, for the first time, were among the relief stores.

Eager to muscle in on the glory-hunting keepers and labourers, it was the turn of the painters at Christmas 1951 to suffer the trauma of marooning, although in incredibly comfortable circumstances. Three keepers and two painters from Dublin were stranded due to *tempestuous weather* for seven weeks and thirteen weeks respectively and naturally the story was dealt with differently in the west and east of the country.

Marooned Erris keepers relieved – Dublin Men Spend Christmas on Lonely Island, crooned the *Ballina Herald* on 2nd February 1952. *Having spent seven weeks in complete isolation on wave-lashed Eagle Island, light-keepers Frank Sweeny, Ed Cummins and an assistant named Coughlin from Cork (possibly Daniel Coughlan back again) were relieved on Sunday evening last when, in the face of a sharp gale and choppy sea, the crew of the local relief boat put out from Scotchport and brought the marooned men safely ashore.*

John Browne and James Beirne, painters and natives of Dublin, who had been thirteen weeks on the lonely outpost, rejoiced when they got to the mainland to take their departure for their homes on Monday. Apart from tempestuous weather, shortage of cigarettes during the past three weeks was the only hardship endured. See page 246 for James' take on the matter.

It makes you wonder if some enterprising soul should have opened a tobacconist's on the island to profit from the constant marooning of cigarette smokers on the island.

On March 13th 1954, the *Ballina Herald* announced that Captain W.J. Kelly, Chief Superintendent of Irish Lights, had made a comprehensive survey of the Erris coastline, with the view to introducing a helicopter relief service to the often-inaccessible islands of Blackrock and Eagle. With the organisation's customary speed of action, it would only take another fifteen years for the service to come to fruition.

In the summer of 1954, Irish Lights began a series of renovations at the four Erris lighthouses – Blacksod, Blackrock, Eagle Island and Ballyglass – with the spin-off for the local economy considerable. There was much employment, reported the *Ballina Herald*, with wages amounting to as much as £10 per week when overtime was factored in.

For one of these newly super-rich labourers, however, it was nearly the last pay packet he would get. Martin Neary of nearby Termoncarragh overbalanced and fell into the *boisterous sea*, while boarding the relief boat on the island in September that year.

Fortunately, keeper Jack Stapleton leapt in after him and succeeded in hauling him to the bottom of the landing stage.

On Christmas Eve 1955, the *Mayo News* did one of those *Spending Christmas on the Rock* articles, which was basically a list of who would be where for the Big Day in the four – or was it five? – Erris lighthouses. Ted Sweeney (Blacksod) and Anthony Padden (Broadhaven) were mentioned and then summarily dismissed, as they would not be forgoing their home-cooked Christmas dinner and therefore should not be pitied.

The position, the paper continued, was much different *for the keepers on Blackrock and Rockall, off the Erris coast, and for those on Eagle Island*.

It is hard not to wonder if the journalist believed that the lighthouse was called 'Blackrock and Rockall' and/or if Rockall is off the Erris coast and/or if Eagle Island isn't.

At Blackrock, PK Walter Coupe was convalescing, so the three keepers on duty on the rock were W.P. Roche, D. Gillen and H. Stocker. Gillen shouldn't have been there but bad weather had given Johnny Connell a Christmas ashore instead.

On Eagle, the keepers on the rock were PK J. Roche, J.P. Stapleton and R. Polly, with Frank Sweeney drawing the long straw and being allowed to digest his turkey in comfort without having to worry about the light. **Robert G. Polly** (507) is not on the list of official keepers at the station so perhaps he was simply standing in temporarily.

The men's plight was better than in other years, the paper states, as they were not forced to rely on tinned goods alone and the Christmas cake was now allowed to be made long before the festive season. Did Irish Lights really relax a rule forbidding that?

For some reason, the keepers forced to spend Christmas on Rockall were not listed. Now, that would really have been a hard station!

There was a big change for the keepers' families ashore in 1955 when Irish Lights decided to sell the Blackrock shore dwellings at Blacksod, together with the Eagle Island dwellings at Corclough West. To be fair, it wasn't just Mayo that was affected. There had been a policy change in Irish Lights countrywide that the keeper and his family could now decide where they wanted to live when ashore rather than being forced into the company's own accommodation. The families left towards the end of 1955.

The adverts, which began to appear in May of that year said the houses were substantially built, occupied until recently and were available to purchase either individually or as a block of four. Like most Irish Lights houses they consisted of two terraced houses and two slightly larger houses on the ends, facing at right-angles to the road. One of the end houses was always for the principal keeper and his family. The houses were sold in October 1956.

Marooning was the order of the day in December of that year, with the annual 'will they/will they not get home for Christmas' game being played out along the Erris coast.

The *Evening Herald* of December 10th, under the headline *Lightkeepers on Saltwater Bread* broke the news that *three marooned lightkeepers on the bleak Eagle Rock lighthouse, 14 miles west of Co. Mayo's Blacksod Point, sat down to a breakfast of saltwater bread and 'iron rations' this morning and hoped they would be home for Christmas*.

Two of the men, Mr. J. Roche of Skerries and Mr. L. Stocker of Belmullet, have completed 56 days on the Rock, isolated by rough seas.

The third keeper, Mr. J. Gallagher, arrived on the last relief boat over a month ago.

In nearby Scotchport harbour, the relief boat St. Mary, is waiting to make the two-mile dash to the lighthouse as soon as the seas calm sufficiently.

Latest move in the relief plans is a helicopter rescue. Should the St. Mary not be able to relieve the men within the next two weeks, a helicopter might be used. The Rock is suitable for such a rescue.

In their daily radio telephone communication with Blacksod Point, the keepers express one big worry: 'We hope to get home for Christmas.'

On Saturday December 15th, the *Mayo News* announced that there had been no let-up of the weather and the men were still stranded on Eagle Island 'some six miles from Belmullet,' rather than fourteen miles from Blacksod Point. However, there was no danger of starvation. Not only did they have six months' worth of rations but apparently, they also had a *number of sheep which they may use for food if necessary*. It is not known if the goats were agreeable to the sheep muscling in on their emergency rations contract.

The *Ballina Herald* the same day put the blame down to *mountainous seas pounding the Erris coastline and lofty billows crashing on its stupendous cliffs*. They also named the three keepers as Mr. Roche, Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Stapleton, the latter quite unexpected as all other accounts name Lenny Stocker as the third keeper.

However, the space-time continuum was repaired by 23rd December when Gallagher, Stocker and Roche were taken off. The first two had been marooned for 74 days and PK Roche for 56 days, despite the fact that the *Herald* had said on December 10th that Roche and Stocker were the longest without relief.

We are indeed fortunate that Jack Roche was interviewed about his ordeal by the *Irish Independent* in the early days of 1957, otherwise we might have dismissed it as just another storm. It seems to have been quite a bad one and Mr. Roche's first-hand account is a timely reminder how bad things could get out there.

Speaking from his home in Skerries, co. Dublin, the 47-year-old principal keeper said, *I have not talked about it much because it is hard to describe the seas that were running and people would hardly believe it if you told them.*

I had a feeling when we went to the island on 27th October that it was going to be a hard time. We got up the storm shutters and saw that nothing was left to chance. We had several bad blows from south-west with lots of wind, and from the north-west which brought over a good deal of water.

At one stage, he said, they feared there would be a repetition of the 1894 disaster when the East tower had come down. As we know, it hadn't. He had been due for relief on December 8th but four reliefs passed with no hope of the boat getting near the island.

The really bad weather began about December 1st, he said, and from then almost continuously until December 17th, it was the worst I ever remember – and I have seen some bad seas. Fortunately, the wind all that time did not go up any further than west. If it had shifted into west-north-west or north-west, I am convinced it would have been as bad as the seas that took the top off the old North station.

The waves, he said, rose higher than the lower radio beacon mast which was 75 feet high and the tower was frequently subsumed under a barrage of water.

One morning, just at first light, I saw two seas meeting at a headland about two miles away from the island, he continued, and it was the most terrifying sight anyone could have seen.

I am sure nothing like it has been seen from Eagle Island for a generation. There is not much danger in a gale that abates in a few days but when it is continuous for seventeen days, it is dangerous and raises almost unbelievable seas. Without relief, we could do nothing but watch and wait. The two assistant keepers were 'trumps' all through the storm. They were two of the best men anyone could wish to work with.

We lived in hope that at the coming of the full moon about the middle of December, the seas would ease up and on December 17th, as we had hoped, the seas did go down and the wind steadied. This followed an electric storm which occurred about then and was an extraordinary sight.

From December 1st, the barometer never remained steady but wavered, in a very strange way, between 27.80 and 28.30. With the uncertainty of the weather, it was almost inevitable that the subject of rations should come up. *We had planned*, said Mr. Roche, *that if we were not relieved, we would kill one of the sheep on the island for Christmas.* As it happened, they were taken off by the *St. Mary* on December 23rd and the sheep was reprieved. Mr. Roche was due back on Eagle Island the following day.

Jack was later given the honour of taking over the new Kish lighthouse in Dublin Bay in 1965. He passed on in August 1998.

At the end of April 1957, a rolling sea was thwarting attempts by the Irish Lights Tender *Granuaile* to land the annual supply of water, coal and victuals. Despite eventually being able to complete its mission, water would have to be redelivered two months later due to the dry conditions. This time, it was the *ILT Valonia* who did the honours after picking up the water at Castletownbere.

On August 24th 1957, the *Western People* reported on unsettled weather giving rise to heavy seas off the Erris coast over the past two weeks. It said that the relief boat had put out from Scotchport but had only got halfway to 'the wave-lashed outpost,' when, *despite the determination of a daring crew, mountainous seas forced them back to their point of departure.*

A whimsical and possibly apocryphal story appeared in the same paper at the end of August. Apparently two English ladies were visiting Termoncarra on a foggy day when their solitude was interrupted by the roaring of a bull in amongst nearby cattle. So perturbed were they by this frightful cacophony that they fled in their car back to the hotel in Belmullet where they were staying. Pouring out their terrifying tale to the owner, he patiently explained to them the workings of the Eagle Island foghorn.

For once, it appears, Christmas went very smoothly in 1957. No keeper got marooned at either Blackrock or Eagle Island. Keepers Leyden, Gallagher and Stocker were able to spend a calm and crisis-free Christmas on the rock.

The only real story of note in 1958 concerned the rescue of young Dun Laoghaire-born electrician, Patrick Coffey, from the island in April of that year.

Battling through gale-force winds and high-running Atlantic seas, wrote the Mayo News on May 3rd, Blacksod fishermen reached the Eagle Island lighthouse to take off ... Patrick Coffey ... who had been seriously ill for four days. His condition had become so serious that he was being treated over the radio-telephone from Blacksod by Dr. John Conway of Belmullet. At noon, a motorboat skippered by William Meenaghan of Glosk, Blacksod, took a currach aboard and three hours later stood off the lighthouse. Here, veteran fishermen Tom and Michael Cawley rowed the currach to the base of the lighthouse. The sick man

was swung out by derrick and lowered into the waiting boat. The sick man was immediately attended to on the shore by Dr. Conway and taken to Belmullet Hospital. He was transferred to Dublin the following day.

The *Irish Press* added the important details that it was a fourteen-mile slog through terrible seas to get from Blacksod to Eagle and the return journey took three and a half hours. A fitter, the well-named Desmond Frame, was also taken off the island at the same time.

It is quite an amazing fact that the lighthouse relief boats around the country had all adopted the outboard engine by the early years of the twentieth century, with the exception of Eagle Island, where the Gallaghers were still relying on strong rowers well into the fifties. But what of the fact that the old-fashioned currach was able to get in close to the rock to effect the rescue where larger boats had failed? Writing in the *Irish Independent* on May 9th, our old friend A.A. Bestic explained the science:

Many a sailor, let alone a layman, had he been given a choice of a lifeboat or a currach to make the rescue that wild day off Eagle Island, would have stepped into the lifeboat without hesitation, he said. Currach men such as William Meenaghan and Tom and Michael Cawley, who manned the frail little craft on its errand of mercy, had different ideas.

A currach sits on top of the water with the lightness of a seagull. When alongside a cliff or a steep, sloping rock, the backwash keeps it clear of danger.

Even should a bigger sea than usual sweep it up a slope, the fact that it draws but an inch or so of water enables it to return to the sea again without bumping. 'Those craft,' a fisherman once said to me, 'can float on a bubble of froth.'

Anybody who has watched currach men manoeuvring their craft realises that there is a telepathy between the crew. No orders are given; yet the men pull, back or turn their vessel in absolute unison, as though controlled by a master brain.

Under such conditions in which Mr. Coffey was rescued, a ship's lifeboat is severely handicapped. Orders have to be issued by the helmsman and even that fraction of delay could mean trouble.

Due to the vessel's weight, the backwash cannot exert the same power and should she be unavoidably swept up a slope, she will bump as the sea recedes, owing to her deeper draught. She has of course many advantages over the currach during bad weather in the open sea.

Eagle Island is a mighty bastion of a rock off the coast of Mayo where the sea is never still. Even on the calmest day, one can see the great Atlantic Ocean breathing, as it were, around it.

With majestic slowness, the swell gurgles inexorably up the defying cliffs. A momentary pause and then it descends in white cascades to reveal at last the dripping weed showing dark above the boiling surf.

There is a tremendous sucking noise, like a vast intake of breath, before the next swell starts its climb. Here, indeed, is desolation and loneliness with naught but the screaming of seabirds and the sound of the restless sea

The Ghost of Eagle Island¹⁶

During the 1940s and into the late 1950s, a British coal ship used to come into Blacksod Bay once a year to supply coal to the three lighthouses around the Mullet Peninsula – Blacksod lighthouse on the southeastern tip of the Mullet; Eagle Island near Annagh Head on the northwest corner of the Mullet a few hundred yards offshore; and Blackrock lighthouse about six miles west of the Inniskea Islands. A local boatman by the name of Pat Walsh, Glosh, but a native of Inniskea, took on the delivery of the coal from the ship to all three lighthouses.

On one of these occasions, my uncle Michael and Pat's son stayed overnight on Eagle. During the day they were moving the coal bags from the landing up to the lighthouse and stacking the bags four or five bags high. Near the end of the day, they were coming from the landing with some bags on a trolley and they were nearing this pile of stacked bags when, all of a sudden, one of the bags seemed to be taken from the top of the pile and thrown towards them.

Now there was no way that this bag could have fallen. Both men actually saw the bag being lifted straight from the top and then thrown towards them.

The other man immediately turned to my uncle and said *We will have a visitor tonight* and my uncle immediately turned to the other man and said *What sort of visitor?* to which he said to him *Come with me and I will show you something.*

He brought him around the back of the lighthouse and pointed out to him where blood had been spilt on the rocks as a result of a fall of one of the previous light keepers many years before that and he said his ghost still haunts the lighthouse. *I think this could be one of the nights he visits.*

They worked on late into the night until they had all the coal shifted from the landing and then they returned to the lighthouse to have something to eat and retired for the night. There was only one bedroom and two beds and they lay awake talking for some time after going to bed and sometime after midnight they heard slow footsteps coming up the wooden stairs towards the room and the other man said to my uncle, *I think our visitor is here.*

The door was open and the bedroom was in total darkness and before long the footsteps were at the door and walking into the room. Michael Walsh was the name of the man who was there that night with my uncle Michael and he shouted at the ghost to go away or he would shift him to somewhere he wouldn't be too happy about. With that, the footsteps stopped. On the third time he ordered the ghost to leave, they heard the footsteps walking back towards the door and down the stairs fading into the distance. By now my uncle Michael had broken out into a cold sweat and was very frightened but Michael Walsh had no fear whatsoever because he possessed what was known locally as *Ceist an Taibhse*, meaning *A question asked of the ghost*. This actually contained ten personal questions that would be asked of the ghost by any one person possessing this power.

¹⁶ <https://turassiar.ie/history-4/> This is from an incredible local history site based on the Mullet peninsula detailing, recording and recreating many long-forgotten tales and traditions of rural life.

After that they went back to sleep and the next day Michael Walsh said to my uncle, *Don't be afraid anytime you stay here. He has often come here when I have been here on my own.* My uncle Michael never slept on Eagle Island again.

As a postscript, I have not been able to determine whether Michael Walsh was an auxiliary keeper or a manual labourer. He did however appear to consider Eagle Island his home because he was up in court in 1954 for hitting a pedestrian with his motor bike. He gave his address as c/o Eagle Island, Belmullet, co. Mayo.

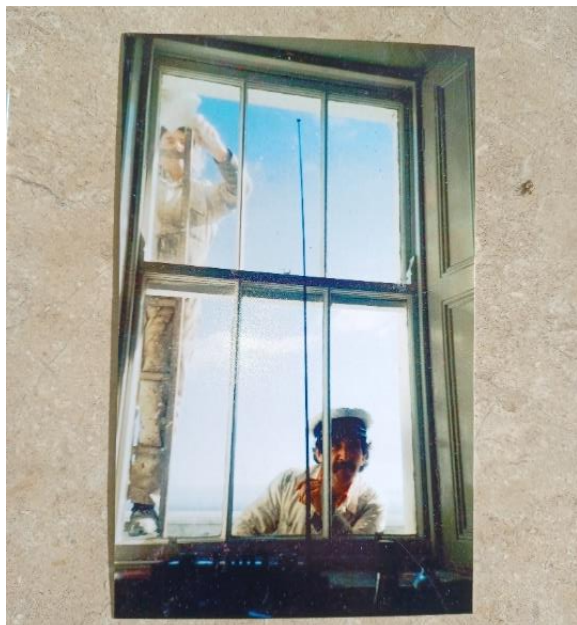
Despite the fact that the pedestrian walked away after the accident, which happened on McCurtain Street, Cork, he was still hauled up on the charge of driving a motor-cycle without due consideration. His defence was that he thought he had the right of way because the pedestrian hesitated but the judge fined him £1 anyway.

Gerry Sweeney tells a story that he himself was told, that might well have been construed as supernatural by the man who witnessed it.

There were two keepers on the island who were always up for a bit of sport, particularly at the expense of visitors. One time, a fitter came down from Dublin. Now, Dublin men weren't readily gullible but they weren't really used to shadow and darkness, having 24-hour street lighting in the city.

So, on the first night, the fitter was treated to the spectacle of the two keepers, both 'bollock-naked,' to use Gerry's elegant phrase, and one chasing the other around the yard with an axe. The poor man never came out of the house for a week.

Painting



*John Lingwood and Andy Newman
(left)*

As most people know, lighthouses are distinguished at night by the characteristics of their light, whether it is flashing, occulting or static, the height from which it is shown, even its strength. Particularly in the nineteenth century and earlier, ships arriving across the Atlantic might not have had a clue if they were approaching the coast of France or the coast of Scotland and the glimpse of a high-powered light would send them poring over their Admiralty charts to determine their precise position.

Similarly, if a ship arrived on the European coast during daylight hours, the lighthouses would act as daymarks. The self-same Admiralty charts detailed the height of each tower and the colour it was painted just in case there was any confusion.

The problem with lighthouses was that the Halpins and the Douglasses and the Stevensons always used to insist on building them next to the sea. Not in Athlone or up the Galtees but right on the seafront, where salt-laden gales would scour off the paint in a matter of hours.

And so, from a very early stage of lighthouse evolution, the Ballast Board (later the Commissioners of Irish Lights) used to employ their very own team of dedicated painters who would go around from lighthouse to lighthouse ensuring that the white (or black or red or green) paint that signified a particular lighthouse was actually visible and hadn't been stripped off.

It appears that these very early painters were practically itinerant, wandering the country from station to station, sometimes not even returning home for months or years at a time. The paint would be delivered to the lighthouse and the principal keeper would be told to expect two painters arriving on a particular date. It was always two painters, never more, never less. And for some strange reason, a lot of them were from Dublin. James Reilly, PK at Eagle Island West, for example, is recorded in the Lighthouse journal of 1876 (p121 #1507) reporting the arrival of the painters and asking what was the story with overtime?

The 1859 Commissioners Report for each station says that each station was painted every year. The paint was procured by contract, said the report, but the workmanship was not by contract. This of course could either mean that the painters were Ballast Board employees or the keepers did the painting. There are several reasons to believe that the former situation existed. Two Thomas Gribbens – father and son – gave their occupations as painters living at the Maidens' lighthouse on the occasion of the son's marriage to the keeper's daughter in 1853. William Callaghan junior, the keeper who buried two sons on Skellig Michael in the late 1860s was described as a painter with the Ballast Board prior to him becoming a keeper. And so on.

Incredibly, the figures given for cost of paint at each Eagle Island lighthouse in 1859 was exactly the same - £41 9s 8d – despite the fact that the East tower was much higher!

On Eagle Island, like all other stations, the painters did the majority, but not all, of the painting. They painted the tower and the keepers' houses (inside and out) and the equipment rooms. The keepers' responsibility was for anything that needed to be whitewashed, as well as the flagpole and the dome of the lantern. According to former keeper John Hamilton, the flagpoles were usually painted by the junior member of staff, as they were normally the lightest and were less strain on the bosun's chair required for the job. It also seems that the principal keepers were responsible for setting up the hoists used by the painters to do the tops of the towers.

Andy Newman was a painter with Irish Lights in the 1980s.

The first time I was on Eagle, we arrived just after an eight-day storm, he said. The water tanks had been washed away, the outside toilet doors were gone, fierce damage altogether. It was my first time with Noel Casey as my working partner. We helped the keepers clean up, Joe Sheridan, Frank Doyle, two fitters and ourselves. Donal O'Sullivan was there, John Gallagher, Oliver Crowley.

We used to go out there for four weeks at a time, then come ashore and do another job, then back onto Eagle to finish up. There was a lot of painting to be done. The beacon masts had to be painted yellow, the air and sea masts, the helipad, the cottages, the tower, fog

signal room, the main engine room, the other engine room. The keepers used to do the storm wall themselves. I was partnered with John Lingwood the second time I was there.

Unlike the keepers, we had to apply for leave. We used to take it over Christmas, when we would also get the necessary training done, health and safety training, helicopter training and the like.

Like keepers, painters were subject to the vagaries of weather and could be hit as hard as keepers when it came to overdue reliefs. In 1951-2, as we have seen, three keepers and two painters were marooned on the rock over Christmas due to high seas. The *Irish Independent* of 1st February 1952 for once ignored the keepers; the headline ran *Lighthouse Painters Marooned by Storms*.

Marooned on Eagle Island by mountainous seas, James Byrne, 12, Reginald St., Dublin and John Browne, Wolfe Tone Square, Bray, painters in the Irish Lights Service, have now, after 13 weeks, returned to their homes – and to appetising meals and cigarettes to smoke.

James Byrne (below)



‘Have a cigarette; it’s great to be able to hand them around again after a month of no smokes,’ said 30-year-old James Byrne at his fireside as he prepared to tell me about their ordeal on the rock island of about half an acre.

‘The night before the relief boat arrived, we had used the last of our flour to bake a loaf,’ he said. ‘We were taken off just in time because all we had left were sea biscuits. Most of the time on the rock, the meals consisted of canned meat and beans. When our butter and tea ran out, we had to borrow from the keepers. We had no cigarettes for four weeks and the first three or four smokeless days were the hardest.’

The only contact that the two men had with the mainland during their extended stay was by radio telephone with Blacksod. Mr. Byrne told me that on Christmas Eve, he sent a telegram to his invalid mother in Dublin, saying ‘Sorry, I can’t make it.’ Then on New Years

Day, his friend, Miss Anne Nee (sic – might this have been Annie??) of Clifden, sent him greetings.

‘During the three years working with Irish Lights, this was my longest period to be marooned on a rock,’ he continued. ‘The seas around were mountainous and we had to keep the storm shutters up all the time.

‘On our way to the shore station, we bought a turkey from a Belmullet butcher to bring out to Eagle with us in case we had to stay over Christmas.

‘We killed the bird three days before Christmas and shared it with the three lighthouse-keepers, Messrs F. Sweeny, E. Cummins and Coghlin. (sic)

‘The turkey had eaten a fair share of their rations before they killed it.’

They were landed on the lighthouse rock on October 28 with orders to paint the beacon house and keepers’ dwellings, inside and outside. This job was finished about the middle of December, but efforts to take them back to the mainland failed because of the stormy seas.

Eventually, on Sunday last, a 16-footer from Scotchport, the shore station, succeeded in achieving their relief.

Mr. Browne is married and has three children. He has been with Irish Lights for about eight years.

The division of the painting between the painters and the keepers might have seemed equitable on most stations but on Eagle, there was a storm wall 140 yards long and up to eight yards high in places. It was a job universally detested by the keepers. Al Hamilton, a mechanically minded AK on Eagle from 1973 to 1978, was determined to do something about it.

All lighthouse stations back then had their perimeter walls whitewashed i.e., painted with lime wash, so that the walls acted as a daymark, making the station visible from a long way off, he explained. This was done by the keepers using buckets of lime wash, large brushes and a lot of ladder work. All this was done in the spring of the year, in preparation for the annual tour of inspection by the Commissioners and dare anything be amiss for them!

Every year, we would have to whitewash the storm wall. Terrible job. Weeks and weeks of work with a bucket and a brush and a double extension ladder. Anyway, P.J O'Boyle and I, we were both mechanically minded, you know, and we'd talk about making a machine to make the whitewashing a lot less painful. So, one day, Tom Hyde, the PK, told us to take the day off and go and make the machine.

So that's what we did. We got an old milk churn with a good solid lid and valves and pipes and a bit of a tube and then we filled it with whitewash. And then we injected compressed air into it. We used the compressed air for the foghorn.

And it worked magnificently! It took us two days to do the job that had previously taken us two months!"

By the early eighties though, it seems that it was back to the old ways. Richard Cummins, who had two stints on the island during that time, does not remember the whitewashing fondly.

There was always something to be done on Eagle. It was one of the hardest stations. It had the biggest wall of any lighthouse, ten feet thick, and of course, it had to be maintained, inside and out, as a daymark. On the seaward side, there were ladders stuck on concrete plinths and when it came to whitewashing those walls, front and back, you were always wet. You had to spread the whitewash on with sweeping brushes, big, thick, heavy, hairy things. Slosh it on and spread it around. A lot of work.

Louis Cronin, also an SAK in the early eighties with a remarkable talent for landing himself in hot water, also missed out on the Hamilton / O'Boyle labour-saving device. *Irish Lights used to send down buckets and buckets of Sandtex to spray paint the big storm wall every year. The keepers would water it down and use the balance for their own homes. It was a long and tedious job and one time I told the PK I wasn't doing it any more. Of course, I ended up on a disciplinary.*



Detail from a Fergus Sweeney photo. The concrete plinths can clearly be seen running horizontally through the rocks at the bottom of the wall. These were for propping up the ladders when whitewashing the walls and they run the length of the wall, according to Fergus. It would probably not be a job I'd particularly fancy myself.

The traditional colour scheme for the lightkeepers' dwellings appears to have been white walls on the outside with green around the door and grey window sills. Artistic licence was not to be tolerated.

In 2020, Irish Lights put out a tender to paint its operational lighthouses. This would involve 'full or part painting' of the towers and associated dwelling houses. As many of the dwelling houses have been left to the elements for forty years, it is doubtful that many would be included in the scheme. The lighthouses with tourist potential would seem to have had priority. Smaller lights like Rotten Island off Killybegs were informed that painting was declined as it was not a safety necessity due to navigational equipment on-board incoming boats. Presumably Eagle Island would fall into the same category.

And we will give the final word to Andy Newman. *Once automation came in in the late eighties, that was the end of the painting. It's a terrible sight, seeing the station now. Unbelievable. Everything that was required to maintain these historic buildings was provided and to see the way it is now ...*



A company called Crafty Bird has started to produce a range of milk paints, which come as a powder to which you add water. One of the shades is called Eagle Island Lighthouse White and was, says the description, 'inspired by the white of the Mayo lighthouse, and will fill your home with the freshness and tranquility of the Atlantic.' Probably the first time that the words 'Eagle Island' and 'tranquility' have been used in the same sentence.

The 1960s

Eagle Island is a mighty bastion of a rock off the coast of Mayo where the sea is never still. Even on the calmest day, one can see the great Atlantic Ocean breathing, as it were, around it. – Captain A.A. Bestic

Stormy Seas

Arranmore lifeboat answered a call by a stricken French trawler that had lost its propeller off Eagle Island. When the lifeboat arrived at the scene, a British trawler was there and it was this vessel that towed the trawler to Derry, where a new propeller was fitted – *Donegal Democrat*, Friday 25th March 1966

The fishing boat *Loch Duba* owned by Martin Healy of Binghamstown developed engine trouble off the Mullet peninsula and the four-man crew – skipper Martin Neary, Denis Murphy and his son Richard, and John Doherty – were obliged to row the vessel to Eagle Island lighthouse. From there, they contacted Blacksod, from where Dominick Lavelle's fishing boat came and towed the boat to Annagh. The crew were none the worse for their ordeal – *Western People*, Saturday 13th August 1966

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
John Roche	1954-62		John Gallagher	1956-61
Walter Coupe	1962-64		Leonard Stocker	1956-63
Robert Nelson	1964		James Leyden	1957-60
Thomas Hyde	1964-69		John Stapleton	1960-65
Joseph Stapleton	1969-72		Hugh McLaughlin	1961-63
			Michael Shannon	1963-67
			Patrick Ryan	1963-68
			John Carmody	1965-68
SAK			Hugh Sullivan	1967-69
Eugene O'Leary	1963-64		Charles Meehan	1968-71
Brendan Conway	1966		Thomas Roddy	1968-71
Al Hamilton	1969		Charles Hernan	1969-72

I remember being on Eagle Island many years ago and it was a very bad day with a big sea. An old lighthouse keeper said to me, 'Do you know, son, the sea is a cruel mistress.'

So said **Thomas 'Tux' Tweedy** at the Hook lighthouse gathering in 2013. Tux, who is almost as famous as the Hook lighthouse to which he will forever be linked, does not appear in Frank Pelly's list of keepers. This is probably before he earned his stripes and

became an assistant keeper. As he joined the service in 1960 and made assistant in 1963, we can confidently date his tenure on Eagle to this time.

Walter Coupe was back for his third stint on the rock in 1962 so, moving swiftly on, we come to **Robert Nelson (362)** who appears to have only been there during 1962. Bobby, as he was known, had been born in 1911 and joined Irish Lights in 1934 after a spell in the Royal Navy. A Donaghadee man, he was at his local Mew Island in 1961 and we know he was principal keeper in Inishtrahull in 1965-66 after being an assistant keeper there in the early 1950s. He died at his home in Donaghadee just after Christmas 1969 while PK at Mew. He is remembered as being one of the nicest characters you could ever meet and for being mad into horse-racing, with a habit of jumping up in his seat every time his horse took a fence.

Following Bobby Nelson on Eagle Island was **Thomas Hyde (380)** who spent five years in Erris as principal keeper of Eagle Island in the 1960s and another four years in the seventies. He had been born in 1916 in Ballycotton, the son of a farmer and had joined the firm in 1938. A very well-liked keeper, Tom was not only a fine carpenter and mechanic but a great traditional musician too. The famous lighthouse poet D.J. O'Sullivan wrote a poem about him when he was in charge of the Kish lighthouse.

Lighthouse Piper (For Thomas Hyde P.K.)

*In the lighthouse Tom sat playing
Bagpipes held upon the knee,
His fingers fondled the chanter,
It skirled a Song of the Sea.*

*The music was O so gentle,
The Coulin and Spinning Wheel,
And then he changed the tempo
To a Hornpipe and Reel.*

*Generators powered the light-beams
As we changed watch that night,
No time for relaxation
Until the dawn broke bright.*

*Seabirds flew in the darkness
Beneath a cloud-capped moon,
And ship and 'plane kept passing
As I followed his every tune.*

*Entranced, that night, I listened
To Tom, who played to me
Wild pibrochs of the islands
And chanties of the sea.*

Tom was a talented lathe woodworker who made and indeed played his own bagpipes, says Al Hamilton. A rocking chair of his was donated to the National Maritime Museum in Dun Laoghaire. In order to make the rocking-chair, Tom first had to make the lathe which he did using the spare motor in the engine room.

Another keeper remembers Tom as a very religious man who, when television came in, always averted his eyes from the television when a certain female newsreader was on, as she wore a rather low-cut dress, a problem that never affected his brother, a priest, when he paid a visit.

Tom would eventually retire as PK of Eagle Island on 30th June 1976, with 38 years' service under his belt. He passed away in 2007.

The keeper who brought the swinging sixties to a close at Eagle Island was **Joseph 'Joe' Stapleton (394)**. He was one of three lightkeeping sons of Jack Stapleton, one of whom, Jackie, we have already met. A quietly-spoken Corkman (yes, there is such a thing), he was born in 1920 and joined Irish Lights in 1940. He married Catherine O'Connor in Goleen in 1946. For some strange reason he was selected by *The Daily Express*, who sponsored the event, to launch the second annual National Boat Show in London and by all accounts he acquitted himself well. He was a keeper on the Fastnet at the time and he had also served at the Baily, Tory Island, Tuskar, Loop Head and Mizen. While at the latter station, he had received a bronze medal for outstanding bravery for climbing down a 145-foot rope to rescue a man in a chasm at the mercy of the rising tide. Joe was transferred on promotion from Rockabill on 1st February 1969. He retired on 29th February 1980 after racking up 40 years' service and died in 2008.

As far as assistant keepers go, John Stapleton, brother of Joe (above) began his second tenure on the rock in 1960. It was to last for five years and he would return as principal keeper in the 1970s.

Arriving in early 1961 from Slyne Head for a sojourn of two years as assistant keeper was **Hugh A. McLaughlin (502)**. A native of Moville in county Donegal and a keen ornithologist, he reckoned he had spent 22 Christmas Days in lighthouses in his career. After Eagle Island, he advanced to being principal keeper and stayed on as attendant at Tory Island, after the station was made automatic in 1990, also acting as assistant attendant at Inishtrahull. He retired from Irish Lights in 1996 after 42 years' service, 36 of which were as a keeper. He died in 2002.

Hugh related a story to Gerry Sweeney about waiting to be taken to Eagle Island one time before the helicopter days. In those days, you took lodgings in a house in Belmullet, normally one bed in a room with three or four beds in it. You could be waiting a while because of the weather.

One Sunday morning, Hugh woke up in this room with Lenny Stocker and another chap, a commercial traveller. *Are you going to Mass, Lenny?* says Hugh.

Lenny groaned. It was the morning after the night before. He propped himself up in the bed and looked across to the third chap, still under the covers.

Are you not going to Mass? he asked.

Oh no, sure, I'm a protestant, came the reply.

I wish to God I was an effin' protestant, replied Lenny.

Gerry swears this is true, with the exception of the use of the word effin.'

Hard on Hugh's heels came **Michael S. 'Mick' Shannon (535)** who was four years on Eagle. He had been born in Donegal in 1939 and joined Irish Lights in 1959. Speaking in later years, Mick must have been talking about this first period of his Eagle Island life when he recalled that he was once marooned on the island for three months. On his relief, he immediately returned home to see his two-month-old child for the first time. His transfer to Slyne Head was announced in November 1966 after three years on the Mullet. Mick later returned on promotion from Loop Head as principal keeper in 1985 and was there when automation struck in 1988.

Patrick 'Paddy' Ryan (393) from Tormakeady was next up, putting in a good stint from 1963 to 1968. His brother Michael was also a keeper and served on Blackrock co. Mayo and another brother Frank would later become PK on Eagle. Their father was F.J. Ryan of the famous old dynasty and thus they were all fifth-generation keepers. Paddy himself had been born at Inishowen when his father was stationed there in 1920. had been on Blackrock during another marathon marooning endeavour in 1948. He retired as a PK in 1980.

John Carmody (497) joined the team as assistant keeper in 1965 and stayed until 1968. A quiet and reserved native of Fodra, Kilbaha, county Clare, it is possible that his career as a lightkeeper started with an incident in 1940 when 15 survivors of a U-boat attack were washed up at Kilbaha after 56 hours fighting hunger, fatigue, rain, hail and wind. A ten-year-old John was quoted in the *Clare Champion*¹⁷ as saying that "the sea was mighty rough that evening," after he had helped in the rescue. On his first posting as an assistant keeper at Hook Head in 1957, he unsuccessfully tried to rescue three mariners who were wrecked on that treacherous coast.

At Eagle, to where was transferred from Slyne Head, there are no reports of John rescuing anybody. Rather the opposite. In June 1968, he fell off a ladder on the island and became possibly the first keeper to be rescued by helicopter from there. (Helicopter relief would only replace the boat tender the following year.) He was flown to Castlebar Hospital with severe leg injuries but made a good recovery. In 1977, he was promoted from AK to PK, when he moved from Eeragh to Inishtearaght. He retired from the job on age grounds in 1990 after 36 years of service.

In 1967, more than 100,000 people converged on San Francisco for the Summer of Love. Less noticeably, **Hugh Joseph Sullivan (532)** arrived on the Mullet, though it was doubtful that he wore flowers in his hair. Having been born in 1938, he was just shy of 30 years old on his arrival and five years in the job. He was one of the last three keepers to leave Rathlin O'Beirne when it became automated in 1974 and later became principal keeper at Inishtrahull. He apparently had an old ciné camera and certainly has a lot of old film of his days at lighthouses around the country and was once airlifted off Inishtrahull with appendicitis. He is a member of the O'Sullivan clan via poet-journalist-keeper father DJ O'Sullivan and grandfather Eugene Sullivan.

Charles 'Cathal' A. Meehan (464) spent three years on Eagle from 1968 to 1971. He was the third keeper of that name to have served on the island. Born on New Years Day 1926, he had joined the service in 1949. He had been on Rathlin West in 1957 and would later spend three years as principal keeper on Tory Island.

¹⁷ 24th February 1940

From 1968-71, **Thomas R. Roddy (474)** served as assistant keeper. The Roddy name is a famous one in lighthouse circles, having been river pilots in Dundalk from the mid-nineteenth century. Joe Roddy served with McCarron in Dundalk in 1871 and the name can be found in every generation of Irish lightkeepers.

A Dublin man, born in 1930, he appears to have thrived on the company of other people and certainly had the gift of the gab. He is remembered as being quite short – under five foot – and somewhat gaunt. An easy-going man with a big, hearty laugh, he nevertheless made no secret of the fact that he was the boss!

In April 1971, his car was in a collision with a cattle-truck in Crossmolina when he was returning to his home in Dublin after a spell on the rock. He was detained for a time in the County Hospital, Castlebar but ultimately fared a lot better than his car, which was a complete write-off. He would make PK four years later.

Speaking in March 2024, about the storms on Eagle Island, he says *you would hear the thud of the wave and you had four seconds to get inside before it crashed down on top of you, not spray but green waves.*

And finally, **Charles Hernan (426)** put in three years between 1969 and 1972. Born in 1921 and having joined Irish Lights in 1945, he was a native of Greencastle, county Donegal, and had been an AK for many years, having been transferred for Rathlin O'Beirne to his native Inishowen in 1951. He was also on Inishtrahull for a year from 1957 and on Tory Island for seven years from 1958, so Eagle Island would have been no great culture shock for him. On leaving Eagle on 1st May 1972, he was promoted to principal keeper at St. John's Point. He died in 2005.

Gerry Butler (604), who was on Eagle Island as an SAK around 1970 remembers Charlie Hernan fondly.

I don't think it was summer I was there, possibly autumn. I was there with Charlie Hernan, a lovely Donegal man, slightly heavy-set feller. One day he suggested we go down to the landing place and give the steps a scrub and a scrape, just in case they might be needed again. (This was shortly after the start of the helicopter era.) Of course, the sea was mad. The way we were going to do it was that one of us would go down and do the scraping and tie a rope around himself and the other would hold the rope in case they got washed away.

And I said, well, I'm not going down there, I'll get drowned. So Charlie said, okay, he'd go down and I could hold the rope. And I said, well, I won't be able to hold you. As I said, he was a bit heavy-set and I was only a skinny young man. But he went down anyway, and he did get soaked!

Another time, I remember talking to him after dinner and he was quizzing me about my family and the people I knew because he was much older and would have known many people of my father's generation. And he was there talking in that soft Donegal accent and absent-mindedly he started eating the potato skins that he'd peeled off during the dinner. And by the time the conversation came to an end, he'd eaten all the skins on the side of his plate!

Keeper number **550, Eugene Francis O'Leary**, resembles Franki Valli as he has a special reason to remember late December 1963. He was a supernumerary at the time.

I got the word to go down to Eagle immediately, he says, so I went back up to my quarters in the Baily to pack my bed-bag. Heavy old thing and awkward too. Then they called a taxi

for me and he took me to the train station in Howth. From there, I went to Connolly and from Connolly to Ballina. They gave me half a crown to tip the porters along the way who would help me with the bed-bag. At Ballina, I had to catch a bus to Belmullet. There was a ladder on the back of the bus and the bus driver had to haul my bed-bag up onto the roof.

At Belmullet, I had lodgings in Gallagher's shop and pub. I don't think they were anything to do with Gallagher the boat tender. They took my food order for the island and I also went to the local butcher to get a 7-8lb leg of mutton. Then they'd let you know when the car would be coming for you to bring you down to Scotchport.

I was landed on Eagle Island on the 23rd December 1963, (the day before Christmas Eve) and the winter was so bad that the relief boat was unable to take me off again until 16th. March 1964 (the day before St. Patrick's Day.)

I could have been relieved earlier but you had to take your turn. So when the boat started to come out again, they took off the keeper who'd be out the longest and so on. We had an oil-fired fridge and it was very hard to get the temperature right. I used to have to cut pieces off the leg of mutton with a hacksaw. And I remember vividly sitting there picking the green bits out of my bread when it started to go mouldy. Of course, we had to dip into the emergency rations – corned beef in a tin, flour and evaporated milk.

Three months! It's no wonder that I'm still skinny!

Brendan Patrick Conway (545) was on Eagle several times as an SAK before his career went into overdrive. On one of these occasions in 1966, he went overdue on the island when his son, Garry, was born. This was only right and proper as he had done the same on Blackrock (Mayo) when his son, Brendan, had been born the previous year. Despite the strandings, he remembers Eagle as 'a comfortable station.'

As a postscript, there are a couple of newspaper reports of lightkeeper transfers that don't quite tally with the official list supplied by Frank Pelly. Frank is at pains to point out that his list is made up from various bullet points throughout the year – payment schedules, inspection lists etc – and it is entirely possible that a keeper who served on a station for a couple of months might not appear on his list. It is also possible that, whereas these transfers appeared in the paper, this is not to say they actually happened. A keeper, say, near to retirement who didn't fancy the rigours of a rock station, may simply have not gone. And thirdly, of course, it is possible that the newspapers got it wrong!

With that proviso, the *Irish Examiner* of 23rd November 1966 states that **Patrick B. O'Shea (516)**, keeper of the East Pier lighthouse in Dun Laoghaire, was being transferred to Eagle Island, to replace Michael Shannon.

And the *New Ross Standard* of 23rd December 1967, revealed that **K. Somers**, assistant keeper on the Tuskar, was being transferred on promotion to Eagle Island. This is a strange one, as Mr. Somers does not seem to appear in the official list of Irish Lights' keepers.



*Tux
Tweedy (top left)
Bobby Nelson (left)
Cathal Meehan (above)
Tom Hyde (top right)
John Carmody (right)*



*Joe Stapleton (bottom left)
and Brendan Conway
(bottom right)*



The 1960s

The *Irish Independent* of 25th November 1960 ran an unattributed story of a visit to Eagle Island by the Irish Lights tender *Isolda* and the landing thereon. As it gives us several details of the island, I reproduce a large part of it in full. The author was aboard the ILT, which had just made a successful delivery to Blackrock, Mayo.

Seventeen miles to the northward lay Eagle Island, an equally, if not more difficult, lighthouse at which to make a landing. Helped by an easterly breeze, the swell experienced at Blackrock was going down. The report from the principal keeper at Eagle Island was 'Landing very good.'

Not even the most expert weather forecaster can tell the conditions at Eagle Island six hours hence. The sun may be shining and there may be little or no wind, but a swell may come rolling in from the Atlantic to make boat-work impossible. Our captain looked at his watch. 'Time is getting on,' he remarked, 'but I can't miss this chance.' The Isolda headed north.

The highest point of Eagle Island is 190 feet. On the seaward side, mighty cliffs ascend sheer out of the water, as though placed there by nature to defy the Atlantic furies. From thence, the land slopes downwards towards the mainland. Due to this formation, the lighthouse, established 1895 – obviously a typo for 1835 – had to be built on the cliff side where it could best be seen.

The Isolda threaded her way delicately past dangerous reefs, finally to drop anchor near the landing place. The motorboat and cutter were lowered and sent ashore with stores.

It was unusual to find that the motorboat was able to go alongside so that we could actually step out onto the iron ladder leading to the concrete platform. Indeed, some of the junior members of the Service had never been able to do so before.

A small inlet affords a certain amount of protection to the landing place. From the rocks opposite, a wire span has been erected by which stores can be hoisted out of the boat and brought to another platform above. Where work has to be carried out as expeditiously as possible, due to the vagaries of the weather, this is a boon.

I laboriously climbed up the usual zigzag flights of steps to be found in all these rock stations and reached the foot of the pathway leading to the lighthouse.

On my way, I stopped to look at some demolished dwelling houses where the families of the lightkeepers once lived. They looked as though they had been knocked down by an earthquake. It was no earthquake. They had been struck by a sea."

The author then goes on to recount in vague but terrifying terms the destruction of the East lighthouse in 1894, which he attributes to the action of a single wave, rather than the cumulative effect of an extremely high sea. *It seemed inconceivable to me, as I stood on the island, he continued, but the evidence lay before my eyes.*

I continued up the path to the lighthouse, now protected by a massive wall, so that the lantern just peeps over it. Some strange fascination made me clamour over rocks and boulders to see what lay on the other side.

Here, somewhat apprehensively, I peered down at the sea and the mighty cliff, inscrutable and silent, save for the gurgling and sucking of the sea and the raucous screams of the wheeling gulls. Thoughts of that wave arriving to such heights gave me an eerie feeling and I clambered back to reach safer ground with feelings of relief.

I returned towards the landing place, past the tall wireless masts which now give directional signals to shipping, past the little walled-in garden made by the keepers in which to grow vegetables, past some graves whose occupants are unknown and down the zig-zag steps to the waiting motorboat.

Dusk was falling as the Isolda hove up her anchor. The ship ablaze with light, the cozy well-furnished cabins, the thick carpeted saloon with its electric log fire glowing and its welcoming armchairs, seemed to accentuate the grimness of the forbidding Eagle Island.

As we steamed away, I stood on the bridge watching the powerful beam of the lighthouse visible for twenty miles, as it swept the darkening sea, and thinking of the lonely men who maintained it so that ships could pass in safety."

In 1979, one of the legends of Irish Lights archives, Michael Costeloe, wrote about his first visit to the Mullet in 1962. *My first introduction to the Mullet peninsula off the northwest coast of County Mayo was during August 1962 when I was en route to spend four weeks on Eagle Island supervising the installation of three new air compressor sets for the fog signal. Prior to this stint on Eagle Island, I had to patiently bide my time for seven days in Belmullet, riding out stormy seas before the relief boat could be rowed out through the tricky bottle-necked entrance of Scotchport into the Atlantic for 3km to Eagle Island. The engine of the usual relief boat was undergoing repairs and indeed still was hors de combat four weeks later when I came off the island. No helicopter reliefs in those days. This enforced sojourn enabled me, once the contractor had announced 'no boat today', to investigate albeit on foot what lay beyond the seized-up canal or navigable cut which joins Blacksod Bay to Broadhaven..."*

There was something of a game-changer for lightkeepers at the end of 1962, when the *Mayo News* reported that not only did the keepers on Eagle Island have a television set, but they also enjoyed – and I quote – ‘perfect reception’ on it. No shinning up the tower to fix the aerial, so. Naturally they only had single channel RTE but the delights of the *Late Late Show*, *Radharc* and *School Around the Corner* certainly beat staring at a blank wooden box in the corner of the room.

Ten-year-old Millie Clotworthy from Wicklow, writing for the *Young Storykeepers* initiative in Covid times, tells a delightful tale, based on a true story, about her great-grandfather, Neil Clotworthy, an engineer with Irish Lights, being summonsed to Eagle Island in a hurry, leaving building work in their kitchen at home unfinished. Neil, who later became Irish Lights’ engineer-in-chief, ended up stranded on the island for a considerable time. His dark brown hair grew strong and thick but, curiously, he also grew a full red beard during his enforced stay on the island. Judging by the timeline, I am assuming this happened in the 1960s.

In 1968, Thomas George (T.G.) Wilson, a Commissioner of Irish Lights, brought out his book *The Lighthouse Service*, – how do they think up such quirky titles? – a book that set the mould of many of those that followed. An informative, yet not quite definitive, book – many lighthouses are omitted for some reason! – it does give, in the appendix, a snapshot in time of the lighthouses under Irish Lights’ care in February 1968.

For Eagle Island, it describes the character of the light as “*Gp. Fl. (3) W.*” which basically translates as three flashing white lights. It gives the candlepower of the light as 102,000 candelas, less than a third of that of nearby Blackrock and less than a tenth of those of the four major south-west lights – Fastnet, Bull Rock, Skellig Michael and Inishtearaght. It had

a range of twenty miles and the station also included a diaphone fog signal, a radio-beacon and a radio-telephone.

Another big milestone in the history of the lighthouse was its switch to an electrically powered light in 1968.

There is a pub in Crosshaven in county Cork called Cronin's and, among the ephemera hanging from the ceiling, is a bulb that they claim once lit the lamp on Eagle Island. It apparently also saw time as a makeshift aerial on a fishing boat before it ended up in the bar.



The Cronin's lighthouse bulb

According to former keeper and lighthouse historian, Gerald Butler, this is definitely a lighthouse bulb, of the type found at Irish stations during the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s. The bulbs were handmade by Mazda and were beautifully wrought with four rods up the inside, which connected to nuts and bolts. They were a 3½kw filament bulb with the one major drawback – the amount of electricity they burned equated to the salary of one keeper!

Eventually Mazda stopped making the bulbs and they were gradually replaced by metal halide bulbs. Although these were only a 1kw bulb, their lumens far exceeded that of the Mazda bulb. Many a keeper was fortunate to get an old Mazda bulb which were prized for their ship-in-a-bottle capabilities.

It does, of course, give me an excuse to visit Cronin's the next time I am in Crookhaven.

The *Stientje Mensinga*

My men ... my men are gone!

The sudden storm that sprang up on 28th October 1927 along the west coast of Ireland caused utter devastation and will forever be remembered in the folk memory of the fishing communities there.

Strong southerly winds had blown for several days as a number of depressions swept across the country. Early on the morning of the 28th, these winds suddenly ceased and many fishermen, cooped up for days by the weather, took advantage of the lull to launch their boats. However, a northwesterly gale suddenly developed in late afternoon which, allied to the strong sea surge, made sea conditions extremely dangerous. Boats, as one, turned for the nearest point of land. Many succeeded in battling the treacherous seas to safety but for many more, it was too late.

In total, forty-five men were lost in the next hour or so. Twenty-six fishermen were lost in what became known as the Cleggan Bay disaster off county Galway, while a further nine fishermen from nearby Inishbofin were also lost. Some were only 500 yards from shore when they were taken.

Off the Mullet peninsula, ten men, some of them little more than boys, from Inniskea were lost in the storm, an event that led directly to the abandonment of the two islands and the relocation of the remaining islanders on the mainland. It is an event that is remembered today in stories, plaques, memorials and folk-tales, probably accentuated by the fact that the islands are distinctly visible from many parts of the peninsula, the ruined stone houses on the shoreline a constant reminder of a once strong, maritime community.

The *Stientje Mensinga* disaster, claiming nine lives, is yet another reminder of the futility of man to try and conquer the waves, particularly off a coastline as treacherous as that. It occurred off Eagle Island, a few miles north of the Inniskea Islands. The victims were not



local, nor indeed Irish, but there is a bond between maritime communities globally that often transcends that of common nationhood. And for many of those who kept watch on the coast for the bodies of the victims, it must have brought back terrible memories of that night thirty-four years previously, when the heart was ripped out of Inniskea.

The Stientje Mensinga a few years prior to her final demise

She had sailed from Rotterdam for Foynes in the Shannon estuary with a cargo of potash. After discharging, she had then put out from Foynes at 8 o'clock on Sunday morning in ballast for Derry, where she was due to pick up a cargo of potatoes bound for the continent. Only she never made it.

It was while passing Eagle Island and its infamous weather that the captain decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Rather than ride out the heavy seas, he decided to turn for land and try and find shelter behind Eagle Island.

There is a slight confusion here over where exactly the ship struck the rock. The official story stays that she hit just before 4am. The first radio message stated that she was 'ashore' at a position east of Eagle Island, later clarified to 3 miles ENE of Eagle Island. This indicates she was on the coastline.

The chief engineer said they had been travelling at half-speed in a gale-force wind when the ship struck rocks about two miles north-east of Eagle Island *and was holed in the bow and later at the stern causing the engine room to be flooded.*

She then drifted off whatever coast or rocks she was on and anchored up about 1½ miles north-east of the island. But was she anchored or was she on more rocks? The German captain of the motor vessel *Maria Schulte* later said he could clearly see the rocks that the *Stientje Mensinga* was on and that he had to be extremely careful to avoid them himself.

One local story says that she struck on a very treacherous submerged rock known as the Manniocht. This is located much further south between North Inniskea and Inis Glora and does not really tally with the official story, unless the ship struck here first and, not realising she was holed, then made her way up the coastal channel to come aground after passing Eagle Island.

Wherever she hit, she called for assistance at 4.19am. There were ten people on board the stricken vessel – the Dutch Captain Johannes Mink (34) and a crew of nine, six of whom were from the Netherlands and three from Spain.

Chief Engineer Ladewijk Van Eyk, who was on his first voyage aboard the *Stientje Mensinga*, was just getting up when he heard a loud bang. He called in to the engine room but it seemed in good shape. Captain Mink ordered everybody on deck, where he informed them that they were on the rocks and they should prepare to abandon ship. Van Eyk looked around at the heavy seas and jagged rocks and helped to prepare the lifeboats, but not before going down to check on the engine-room again. This time he found a large, jagged hole about three feet square and the water rushing in, too fast for the pumps to pump it out again.

The crew knew that the ship was probably doomed but there was no panic. A couple of the Spanish members of the crew were nervous but preparations for leaving were calm.

Henry Gaughan (40), in charge of the Ballyglass life-saving station, received a call from Eagle Island lighthouse and Valentia Radio at 7.30am to say that the ship was in trouble. The lifeboat from Arranmore Island began what would prove to be a mammoth journey from its base in Donegal to the north Mayo coast. From roughly the same distance to the south, the Aran Islands lifeboat also set out. There were no lifeboat stations between the two.

The two lifeboats on the *Stientje Mensinga* were ready to be launched but when they dipped the first one, they lost it. Still, a feeling of calmness prevailed and there was no hurry to launch the second lifeboat as they knew that help was on the way. At 10.23am, Lloyd's of London recorded a message from Captain Mink, stating that the ship had lost its starboard lifeboat.

A Shackleton aircraft took off from Eglinton Air Base in Derry and was circling the listing ship by 11.15am.

At twelve o'clock, Gaughan was advised by Eagle Island lighthouse that the captain had reported that the ship had listed badly to starboard and that waves were now running over the deck. The sea was bad at the time, with visibility reduced to a quarter of a mile, said Gaughan later. Thick rain was falling, accompanied by a heavy fog.

A further message from Captain Mink was recorded at 12.25pm, stating that the crew had moved to the stern, as the ship was sinking lower in the water.

At 12.30pm, two Spanish trawlers entered Broadhaven Bay seeking shelter from the elements. With the coastal lifeboat, Gaughan, accompanied by Matt and Michael Cleary and Andrew Lally, boarded the *Antino* and went out to view the *Stientje Mensinga*

As they came alongside, a Royal Navy helicopter, set off from the Eglington base in Derry, to airlift off the crew.

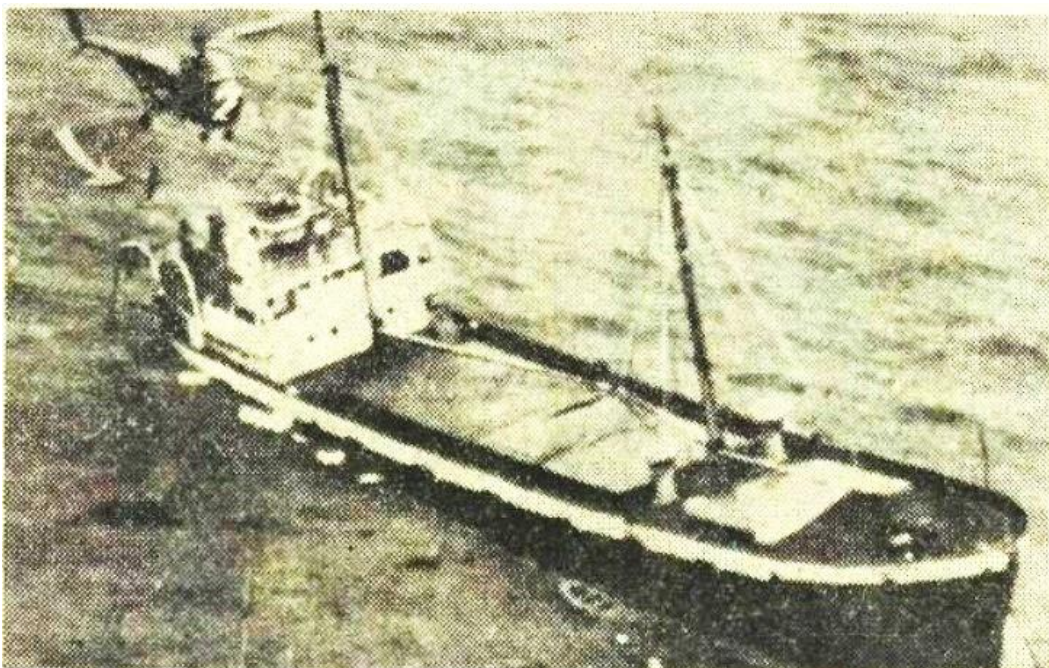
At roughly 1.15pm, Captain Okkens of the 766 tons, Hamburg-registered *Maria Schulte* and his crew of sixteen arrived in the vicinity. The ship was travelling light, on its way from Hull to Sligo to pick up a consignment of potatoes. As they approached the Mayo coast, they heard a conversation between a Dutch vessel and Eagle Island lighthouse and realised there was some sort of emergency. They saw a Shackleton plane flying overhead and thought at first that it was this plane that was in distress. When they realised that it was a Dutch vessel, they headed for the scene and saw the coaster on the rocks, listing at an angle. Making contact with the vessel, Captain Okkens learned that the Chief Engineer had been in the engine room at the moment of impact and that it had been the engineer who raised the alarm.

Captain Okkens said that around this time, there was but a small east wind, roughly force three or four. He asked the Dutch skipper if they wanted to come aboard the German ship. Captain Mink replied in the negative, saying help was at hand but they would appreciate it if the German ship could tow them to safety. Then the RAF helicopter arrived.

As Gaughan and his companions aboard the *Antino* stood off at Erris Head and Captain Okkens and his crew looked on aboard the *Maria Schulte*, the airlift began. From 2.30pm, Lt. Commander Bluett began piloting the helicopter back and forth from the ship to Aughadoon on the nearby coastline. By 4.30pm, six of the seamen had been taken off, two at a time, and landed on terra firma. They were: Ladewijk Van Eyk (chief engineer), Harry Van Dijk (seaman) and cook Gerrit C. Groen, all from the Netherlands; and Jose Sandhez Salvado, Francisco Vilas Rodriguez and Elias Vazquez from Spain.

By this time, the helicopter was running low on fuel. A tanker, containing several thousand gallons of fuel, received special dispensation from the Irish government to drive the forty miles from Derry to Donegal town, where a special adhoc refuelling station was set up on open ground.

At Aughadoon, the six rescued seamen were taken to Jim Carey's house where they were given refreshments. They were then driven by the Rev. Anthony Rea, C.C., Belmullet, and Henry Hurst to a boarding house in Belmullet. They were met there by Mrs. Bridget Hurst, who owned a drapery premises and was the local contact for shipwrecked mariners. She supplied the seamen with boots and clothing and then took them to Mrs. Violet Reeves' lodging house to stay overnight.



A Royal Navy helicopter takes a seaman (arrowed) off the Stientje Mensinga, her stern low in the water

The Rev. Rea reported that one man was suffering slight injuries but in general, all were well, though a little shocked at the dramatic rescue. The three Dutchman, said Reverend Rea, spoke English but the Spaniards did not. The mood though was jovial as nobody had any fear for their four colleagues still on the ship. Indeed, the shipping company was sending a tug from the Isle of Man to tow the vessel into calmer water to effect repairs.

The helicopter, after quickly refuelling, returned to the *Stientje Mensinga* and prepared to lift off the remaining four men. These were Captain Johannes "Joop" Mink, second engineer Sjoerd Mijbosch (21), Geert Jan Kiewiet (27) helmsman, and Bastiaan "Bas" Van Rijn (26), third engineer. However, as Lt. Commander Bluett hovered overhead, the four men on deck waved him away. There would have been plenty of time to take off the four men, he said later. It proved to be the pivotal moment of the tragedy

The Shackleton aircraft was still keeping watch overhead and monitoring the situation. The Arranmore lifeboat, having fought a monumental tussle with the wretched weather, was now approaching the area but was still an hour or so away.

It seemed that Captain Joop Mink had decided that the situation was not serious enough to warrant losing the ship and there was a good chance that the vessel could be saved. He requested that Captain Okkens of the *Maria Schulte* should come alongside and throw a hawser onboard to try and tow the vessel off the rocks.

The German captain later said that he thought that the plan was not feasible, as the ship was sinking deeper and deeper into the water. But the Dutch captain was young and was looking first to his ship and second to his crew.

The *Maria Schulte's* working boat was launched to take the Dutchmen off their vessel. While this was being done, a rogue wave swept over the German boat, washing three of

the crew from bow to stern but thankfully not overboard. The weather had worsened considerably and the five German sailors, with the hawser, put off towards the doomed vessel fifty yards away.

Three times they tried to get around him and get a line from our ship to his – and failed, the German captain said later. *By then it was blowing much stronger, about a Force 8, and the Dutch captain said he would leave his ship.* The time was now five o'clock. It was later surmised that the skeleton crew aboard the *Stientje Mensinga* was not enough to grasp the lifeline thrown. It was also stated that the Dutch sailors caught the hawser but it broke.

Around this time, a Spanish trawler arrived and managed to get in close to the Dutch ship. The two captains remained in conversation for around fifteen minutes and then the trawler left the scene, bringing back the German working boat as it did so. The working boat was, with difficulty, hoisted back on board.

All this time, Jackie Stapleton, the calm and reassuring principal keeper of Eagle Island lighthouse was in constant conversation with all relevant parties. Blacksod and Blackrock lighthouses were also online and monitoring events closely.

The Dutch vessel was now listing heavily and taking on water fast and Captain Mink hurriedly made the decision to abandon ship. He sent a message to Captain Okkens asking him to please come and take them off. The four Dutchmen launched the small rubber dinghy and piled into it. The time was 5.30pm.

At roughly the same time, the *Maria Schulte* launched its lifeboat with a crew of five. Slowly, the two fragile craft made their way to each other, battling the now towering waves. Not only did they meet, at roughly the halfway point – a miracle in itself – but the Dutchmen, with great difficulty, managed to clamber into the wooden vessel. Their relief would be short-lived. Slowly the lifeboat came back to the *Maria Schulte*. The crew on the steamer threw a line but the occupants of the lifeboat could not grasp it. They threw it again and this time they were successful and the boat came alongside. However, everyone could see that the German ship was in danger of being driven onto the same rocks that had done for the *Stientje Mensinga*. The white foam seemed to be getting nearer and nearer and Captain Okkens ordered the engines slowly forward to escape the imminent danger.



Captain Okkens of the Maria Schulte

Hoisting the boat on board requires a great deal of care and skill in calm weather – to attempt the feat in a mass of foaming water with jagged rocks nearby was an impossibility. The ship thrust forward with the lifeboat in its wake but the ocean was in its element now and determined to have its day. Slowly, the lifeboat followed in the larger ship's wake as many listened in on the radio. The tension was palpable. Then suddenly the line snapped and the lifeboat was flung away.

Nearly sixty years later, reported in the *Western People* 9th July 1918, John Cuffe, listening in from the mainland, still remembered the terribly cry of the German captain.

My men ... my men are gone!

The helpless Captain Okkens watched as two or three men were swept overboard and the lifeboat drifted helplessly away. For a time, they could see its lights but they were soon lost in the swirling expanse of foaming water. He shone his own lights after the quickly vanishing lifeboat. But he had his own immediate problems to overcome, as he had to order the engines forward at full speed to escape his own ship's destruction. Not knowing the depth of water around him, he was taking a big chance but eventually he managed to get out into open water and stood off. Eagle Island lighthouse informed him that the Arranmore Island lifeboat had arrived and would search for the boat. Overhead, the Shackleton, in poor visibility, circled the ocean trying to find the helpless boat.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, there was some confusion over the number of mariners missing. This was due to a misunderstanding over the three men who had earlier been swept the full length of the *Maria Schulte*. They were initially thought to have gone overboard and so the headlines in the papers the following morning put the total as twelve men missing.

It had taken the Arranmore lifeboat twelve hours to reach the sinking ship. Although it could do eight knots on a calm day, this was one of the worst storms to have hit the west coast for years. None of them had had a chance to eat breakfast that morning and had battled the weather and the currents for twelve long hours on empty stomachs, without even a hot drink to help revive them. On finally reaching their destination, they were immediately plunged into a search and rescue operation in dark, unfamiliar waters.

The lifeboat from the Aran Islands didn't even get that far. At 12.30am, after being at sea for over seventeen hours, they radioed that they were returning to the station.

Because of the fact that many people onshore were listening in to the various radio communications on the emergency channels, news of the accident quickly spread the length of the Mullet peninsula. People went down to the shoreline to see if the men in the missing lifeboat could be seen. Those who had cars took them to possible safe landing places and shone their headlights out over the sea to encourage the lifeboat to head towards the lights.

In Belmullet, Reverend Rea told reporters that the men who had been rescued a few hours earlier were resting and he wanted to give them one good night's sleep before they were informed of their comrade's fate. And he expressed the view that many people felt but didn't say – that even if the men avoided drowning, they would more than likely be dashed to death on the rocks as they made shore.

For a while, the *Maria Schulte* had sent up flares to assist the Arranmore lifeboat in her needle-in-a-haystack search. The wind had moved from the NE to the NNW and the waves reached terrifying heights. A British trawler, the *Boston Britannia*, moved into the area and assisted the lifeboat in its futile search.

On land, despite Reverend Rea's hopes, the six rescued crew members of the *Stientje Mensinga* were told by a reporter that their four comrades were lost at sea. They didn't seem particularly worried. Perhaps they didn't realise the severity of the situation.

Shortly after midnight, the exhausted crew of the Arranmore lifeboat called off the search and tried to anchor in the lee of Eagle Island but the lifeboat dragged her anchor

and they had to make for the relatively calm waters of Broadhaven Bay instead. Here, they were able to rest after the day from hell, battling biting rain and hail and overwhelming seas.

The lifeboat was manned by coxswain Phil Byrne; second cox Phil Boyle; bowman Eddie Gallagher; first mechanic Charlie Boyle (cousin of Phil); second mechanic Niall Byrne, cousin of the cox; Tony Gallagher (brother-in-law of Charlie Boyle); and two brothers, Patrick and Connie O'Donnell.

Apart from a few water biscuits, they had had nothing to eat since Sunday night. In fact, they had not had anything warm until a Spanish trawler, also sheltering in Broadhaven Bay, gave them some warm coffee.

At around 1am, the Shackleton was withdrawn, after twelve hours of circling and returned to Derry. On the coast, people retreated from the foul weather and made preparations to be out at first light. The *Maria Schulte* radioed that they were six miles north-west of Eagle Island and making three knots in heavy weather but would stay in the vicinity to assist in the search in the morning.

Somewhere, out in the dark, the German lifeboat was still being tossed about by a merciless ocean.

Tuesday 5th December showed little let up in the terrible conditions. Snow, hail and driving rain made conditions seem more like the Arctic than temperate Ireland. At sea, the strong NNW wind and heavy seas prevented the *Maria Schulte* from joining in the search, for fear she should suffer the same fate as the Dutch ship. In consultation with Eagle Island lighthouse, it was decided that she should make for Sligo.

The RAF sent down the Shackletons again and they resumed their search at 8am. Flight Lieutenant D.C. Matheson, in one of the planes, reported that, on arrival at the scene, there was no sign of the *Stientje Mensinga*. It had obviously succumbed to the battering and slid off the rocks onto the seabed, in 29 fathoms of water.

The crew of the Arranmore lifeboat, after a few hours rest, found that they were unable to refuel on the mainland. They had started out from Arranmore with 114 gallons of diesel oil and, after a marathon day, they had less than 50 gallons left. Without being able to refuel, they risked not being able to get to the nearest refuelling station at Killybegs. Accordingly, they had to withdraw from the search and endure another terrible journey back up to Donegal.

On the coastline, nine-year-old Tomás Bán O'Raghallaigh watched the Shackletons fly over.

Our old home was only a few hundred meters from the shore and the search planes would swoop low as they travelled along the coast, he said. I would go up on a flat roof shed and wave at them and they would wave back.

We would then accompany the adults searching. They would send us down the crannies to search, as we were swift and nimble and adept at walking, and indeed running, on the rocks from picking winkles and such. The shore and the sandy banks were our playground.

This was a scene replicated from Erris Head down to Surgeview as the coastal community, most of them earning a living from the sea, came out en masse to help with what was now a search for bodies, rather than a rescue.

44-year-old farmer, John Monaghan, from Elly-Clogher left his house early in the morning with the intention of going down to Tiraun Point to collect sea-rods. On arriving there, he

noticed a body floating in the water. He pulled it out and dragged it up above the high-water mark. Looking around, he saw two further bodies on the beach 600 yards away. After getting assistance, he also pulled them up past high water. They were all wearing lifejackets and were missing their shoes.

Not far away, Patrick Barrett, a farmer from Mullach Rua, on the western side of the peninsular, had come across to Tiraun Point to search for bodies and met John Broderick. At roughly 10.15am, they caught sight of two bodies, one on the beach and one on the rocks about 100 yards below the high-water mark. As the tide was starting to go out, they dragged the bodies out of the sea's reach with the assistance of John Joyce and Michael Cawley. On being told that there was a third body further down the strand, they brought it up to safety. All the bodies, he later said, were wearing lifejackets.

Seven bodies were found at Tiraun Point together with the 20-foot lifeboat from the *Maria Schulte*, which beached in an upright position. It contained a bucket, tin containers and some biscuits. Given the long and tortuous distance between Erris Head, at the very north of the peninsula, and Tiraun Point, which is near the southern end, ten miles away, it could be surmised that the seven men travelled in the boat almost the entire way. The two missing German crew members were doubtless the two that Captain Okkens saw get washed overboard when the rope parted. Their bodies were never found.

With the emergency services contacted, the seven bodies were brought by truck to the courthouse in Belmullet and then to the hospital. The search was abandoned around midday and the Shackletons returned to Derry. Only the local people on the wild shoreline stayed out until long after dark, hoping to find the remaining two German seamen. It was a long, terrible night for many.

At 3.30pm, the *Maria Schulte* docked at Sligo after a nightmare journey in a howling gale. It had been met by Sligo Bay pilot, J.J. Herity and later by river pilot Austin Gillen, whose superb seamanship in bringing the 766-ton vessel to the deep-water berth was widely acknowledged as being unparalleled in such conditions.

After speaking to reporters in his cabin, Captain Okkens stayed on board with his now depleted crew.

Chief Engineer Ladewijk Van Eyk, who had been one of the six men airlifted off the Dutch

vessel by helicopter the previous day, was invited to the hospital to identify the bodies. This he did. He was able to identify the four Dutchmen from the *Steintje Mensinga*, who were:

Captain Johannes "Joop" Mink (33) from Purmerend;

First Mate Geert van Kiewiet (29) from Vlissingen;

Second Engineer Sjoerd Meibos (21) from Oudeschoot; and

Third Engineer Bastiaan 'Bas' van Rijn (26) from Katwijk aan Zee.



The Maria Schulte, flag at half mast

The three members of the crew, he said, had volunteered to remain on board to try and get the ship towed to safety.



A contemporary Dutch newspaper relays the news of the disaster

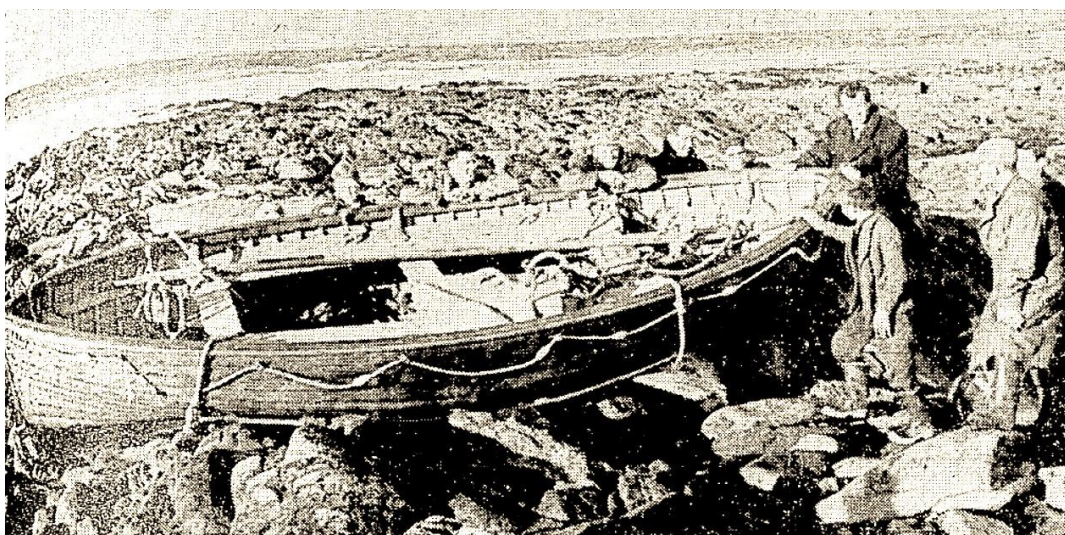
Meanwhile, there was some apprehension when there was no sign of the Arranmore lifeboat returning home as darkness fell. It was not until after 9pm that an exhausted crew finally pulled into Killybegs after thirty-eight hours at sea. Thanks to the generosity of the Bayview Hotel, they managed to get their first hot meal for over forty-eight hours at that establishment. The following morning, they would put to sea again and complete the journey back to Arranmore.

By the Wednesday morning, the storm had finally abated and the sun shone. Five of the rescued sailors were put on a bus to Dublin, from where they would be flown back to the Netherlands. The chief engineer was asked to remain behind for the inquest. Captain Okkens of the *Maria Schulte* was brought from Sligo to Belmullet Hospital to formerly identify three of his crew members. They were:

- Second Mate Gunter Welch (38) from Schonkirchen;
 - Able Seaman Volker Breitner (19) of Hamburg; and
 - Able-Seaman Jorg Mucke (16) of Hagen, also known as ‘the ship’s boy.’
- The two missing German sailors were:
- Able-Seaman Harald Leopold (19) of Hamburg; and
 - Able-Seaman Detlef Utzen (19) of Münchengladbach.

The inquest took place at Belmullet Hospital on the Thursday evening, where the bodies of the seven sailors were laid out, wearing white shirts and black ties. Looking down at the body of 16-year-old Jorg Mucke, the German captain was reported as saying, ‘*Just sixteen and he insisted on going. I did not want him to go. So brave.*’

The jury returned the verdict in accordance with the medical evidence that the deaths had been caused by drowning. Locally, it was thought by some that the men may have reached the shore in a state of exhaustion and then died of exposure in the snow and hail.



The Maria Schulte lifeboat beached on the Mullet

The coroner, though, expressed the view that there was no doubt that the medical evidence was correct.

Patrick J. McAndrew, the foreman of the six-member jury, added a rider to the verdict, with some scathing comments about the life-saving facilities – or lack of them – on the North Mayo coast.

The attaché to the German Embassy in Dublin, who attended the inquest, thanked all those who had taken part in the search and he and Captain Okkens thanked all the Irish, and particularly the people of Belmullet, for their sympathetic attitude.

Following the inquest, the seven bodies were brought by road to Dublin from where they were flown to Amsterdam and Hamburg for burial.

Although it was generally recognised that the young Dutch captain had made a mistake in not allowing himself and three members of his crew to be winched to safety by the helicopter, the disaster highlighted deficiencies in Ireland's lifesaving capabilities.

Having only one lifeboat station between Fenit in county Kerry and Arranmore Island in Donegal (Galway Bay) was not sufficient for the vast distances involved. That it took the Arranmore lifeboat twelve hours to reach the scene was clear demonstration of this.

Being expected to cover such large distances, the lifeboats should be state-of-the-art vessels with the ability to communicate directly with helicopters and planes. The fact that the Arranmore lifeboat had no heating and no facility for heating food only compounded matters.

Naval corvettes should be based on the west coast of Ireland for such emergencies.

The OPW should provide a facility for landing and refuelling lifeboats somewhere along the Mullet peninsula.

John Cuffe remembers that the lifeboat – *a horrible grey painted boat* – wound up at the boathouse in Blacksod. As children, they used to play around it, but never in it, for they saw it as a boat of death.

The Committee of Lloyds of London decided in 1962 to award posthumous bronze medals to the five members of the German crew who lost their lives trying to rescue their

Dutch counterparts. Captain Okkens accepted the medals and distributed them later to the families.

At the same time, Minister for Transport and Power, Erskine Childers explained that he hadn't thanked the British government for their part in the attempted rescue by British planes and helicopters, because there were no Irish nationals involved and therefore it was not up to Ireland to be thanking anyone. In contrast, the Irish Commanding Officer of the Naval Service, who coordinated the rescue, had sent a message of appreciation to his opposite number in Britain.

After an investigation, the Hamburg Marine Office announced that nobody was to blame for the tragedy as it was 'an act of God' and praised the crew of the *Maria Schulte* for their readiness to help.

On the 60th anniversary of the tragedy – Saturday 4th December 2021 – a plaque was unveiled, by family members of some of those who perished on that fateful night, at the Eagle Island viewing point on the mainland. Fittingly, the weather was bitterly cold and a biting wind assailed locals and visitors alike.

The clamour after the tragedy finally bore fruit when a new state-of-the-art, ocean-going lifeboat was assigned to Ballyglass – twenty-eight years later in 1989.





The Dutch victims of the Stientje Mensinga tragedy

Above left – Capt. Johannes Mink

Above right – Geert van Kiewiet

Bottom left – Sjoerd Mijbosch

Bottom right – Bastiaan “Bas” Van Rijn



Helicopters

So it is that the Commissioners, ever anxious that a Lighthouse-Keeper's relief should not be delayed a minute longer than necessary ... began to run trials for the transfer of keepers by helicopter – David G. Vidman, helicopter consultant to Irish Lights 1969



Bolkow 105 on Eagle, early 1980s

If television was a game-changer in 1962, then the introduction of the helicopter relief service in 1969 was probably the biggest improvement in a lightkeeper's life since coal fires were superseded by Argand lamps in the eighteenth century.

For years, rock stations, particularly off the west coast of Ireland had been notorious for overdue reliefs. The lighthouses were there precisely because the seas were so tempestuous, yet it was their very violence that frequently caused terrible hardship when the boat tenders couldn't land. Keepers sometimes had to spend three months and more on a rock, eking out their tinned rations and craving tobacco (gasp!) while boat crews waited on the mainland for the smallest break in the weather, while smoking their brains out. Worse still, people had died on these stations through lack of urgent medical attention. John Kavanagh, for example, a local man, living in Blacksod, and son of James

Kavanagh of Fastnet fame, fell ill on the Bull Rock in 1938 and died before a boat could make a landing.

That is not to say that helicopters could effect reliefs in all weathers but their introduction would certainly decrease the number of days when no relief was possible. In the blink of an eye, the boat tenders were made redundant, disposing of a group of men who had risked life and limb to provide a service to Irish Lights for well over 100 years. While Irish Lights trumpeted the arrival of the helicopters – and there was no denying it was a major safety initiative – there was barely a thank you to the hardy men who now had to find a living in some other capacity.

It was perhaps fitting that a local man should have won the contract to build the helicopter landing pads on Eagle and Blackrock, as the *Western People* announced on 20th July 1968.

Having passed a searching examination by the Engineer-in-Chief at the Irish Lights Head Office, Lower Pembroke Street, Dublin, Mr. John Noone of Corclough West, Belmullet, has been appointed builder of helicopter pads on the Irish Lights islands of Blackrock and Eagle Island off the Erris coast where landing grounds are being prepared for aerial service to the keepers on those wave-lashed outposts in the Atlantic. Mr. Noone had acquired his skill in this vocation during his spare hours at an Arts and Crafts Centre in London a short time ago.

Have to say, that's a great arts and crafts centre where you learn to build helicopter pads!

On 19th September 1969, the *Irish Examiner* reported that the contracts for the helicopter relief had been signed and sealed.

The Commissioners of Irish Lights held a meeting in their Dublin offices this week, it reported, when members of the Press were invited to witness the signing of a contract with Irish Helicopters Limited for the relief of twelve lighthouses off the south-west coast of Ireland. (Geography was probably not the writer's strong point.)

It was announced that the initial contract is for a period of six months starting on October 15, and is in the nature of a trial designed to demonstrate the practicality of relieving those lighthouses which are the most difficult to relieve by boat on a year-round basis. For this reason, the lighthouses chosen, ranging from Fastnet in the south to Inishtrahull in the north, include the most difficult ones in Irish waters.

The operation will be carried out using Alouette III helicopters which are ideally suited to this type of operation and familiar inside Ireland as three aircraft of this type are already in use with the Air Corps.

The man who will have sole responsibility to the helicopter company for the operation is Dr. Ken Holden, formerly 747 Project Controller with Aer Lingus and now Joint Managing Director of Irish Helicopters Limited.

The helicopter bases will be: -

Castletownbere, co. Cork, servicing Roanarrig, Fastnet, Bull Rock, Skellig Michael, Inishtearaght.

Clifden, co. Galway, servicing Eeragh, Inisheer, Slyne Head.

Blacksod, co. Mayo, servicing Blackrock Mayo, Eagle Island.

Fanad Head, co. Donegal, servicing Inishtrahull, Tory Island, Rock Lighthouse.

Those of you who are counting will realise that thirteen lighthouses are listed but a total of twelve were mentioned in the introduction. That is because the last-mentioned – Rock Lighthouse – doesn't actually exist.

As stated, the first helicopters were the Alouette III, a single-engine, light utility machine which the Irish Air Corps had been using since 1963. As time went on, these were upgraded to the Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm Bo 105 which had twin engines. The Bolkow 105, like the Alouette, had inflatable floats if a ditch in the sea was necessary, together with a life raft, radio beacon and flares.

By 2008, the Bolkow was becoming obsolete and Irish Lights began using Eurocopter EC-135s for lighthouse support operations, provided by Irish Helicopters, the sole contractor since 1969. In addition to the normal safety attributes, it also has weather radar and autopilot.

In January 1974, an incident occurred with the helicopter relief that never happened with the *St. Mary* or the *Rose of Scotchport*. Al Hamilton takes up the tale.

When the helicopter had finished the Inishtrahull and Tory Island reliefs, it would normally refuel and make its way to Blacksod helibase for the Eagle and Blackrock Mayo reliefs due the next day, Friday. Tory Island used to track the progress of the aircraft via a radio call every five minutes and then hand over to Eagle to track it the rest of the way.

Tory informed Eagle that the helicopter had not responded to repeated calls and was now regarded as missing. In that case, the Marine Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC Shannon) would be contacted and a search initiated.

Unknown to us, the helicopter, an MBB Bolkow-105 had been hijacked by Rose Dugdale and Eddie Gallagher of the IRA. It was loaded with milk churns full of explosives which they attempted to drop on Strabane RUC station. The improvised bombs failed to explode.

When the helicopter eventually landed and the culprits escaped, it was impounded by the authorities. This left us with a problem, how were we to get a relief on Eagle and Blackrock? It took three days before a helicopter was borrowed from the Scottish Northern Lighthouse Board to carry out the Blackrock and Eagle reliefs.

Al's problems didn't end there, however.

We got back ashore on a Sunday morning at a time when there were petrol shortages, ESB strikes and general mayhem in the country.

Ted Sweeney, the keeper at Blacksod lighthouse and helibase, said that if I went to Mass in Aghleam, he would get me enough petrol to get home! Following Mass, we went to the local petrol pump, which naturally was closed, it being Sunday and petrol in short supply.

Now Ted, being highly regarded in the locality, used his influence to get me a fill of petrol but there was a small problem. There was no electricity. The owner of the pump removed a panel at the front of the pump and stuck a pickaxe handle into the pulley, turned it manually and filled my car!

A helipad was erected and painted below the lighthouse and one of the radio beacon masts was taken down to avoid any nasty accidents. However, according to Knut Janson, when there was too much spray on the helipad, the helicopter would occasionally land in the walled garden at the bottom of the island, where there would be no spray. Knut points out that there were, of course, no vegetables grown in there by that time!

But back to 1969 and, just like that, all new recruits would have to endure lurid tales of winches and duckings from their more seasoned colleagues and suffer jibes about how

easy they had it. Al Hamilton was an SAK, eighteen months in Irish Lights, when he was sent to Eagle in the late 1960s.

My first trip to Eagle Island was in early December 1969 as a supernumerary assistant keeper (SAK). I was eighteen months in Irish Lights. Helicopters had just come into service for lighthouse relief and, as I had not flown in one before, I was super excited. Helicopter support had not yet been set up at the Blacksod heli-base, so the helicopter crew had brought their own fuel in a 45-gallon steel drum in the rear passenger seating area of the Alouette III.

This drum had to be removed from the helicopter with great care to avoid damage to the machine. We keepers had been advised by our employers that helicopters were not like boats and would not tolerate rough handling of heavy cargo!

With this in mind, I willingly helped three others to remove the heavy barrel. As the barrel, sitting horizontally in the back of the helicopter, reached tipping point, it started to fall earthwards! Three of my colleagues jumped away while I tried to stop it falling against the machine. Alas! My index and middle finger were consequently squashed against the machine. But the helicopter was safe and undamaged!

Maureen Sweeney, wife of Ted, the Blacksod lighthouse keeper, took care of the first aid on my finger and off I went to Eagle Island, thinking I would be spending two weeks as a relief keeper and be home for Christmas. The next relief was due a few days before the festivities and another keeper called in sick, so I had to stay on. The same thing occurred the following relief in January, so I had to stay on again. All in all, I spent Christmas, New Year and my twenty-first birthday on Eagle. I was glad to get off!

So much for the helicopters solving the problem of extended stints on rock stations!

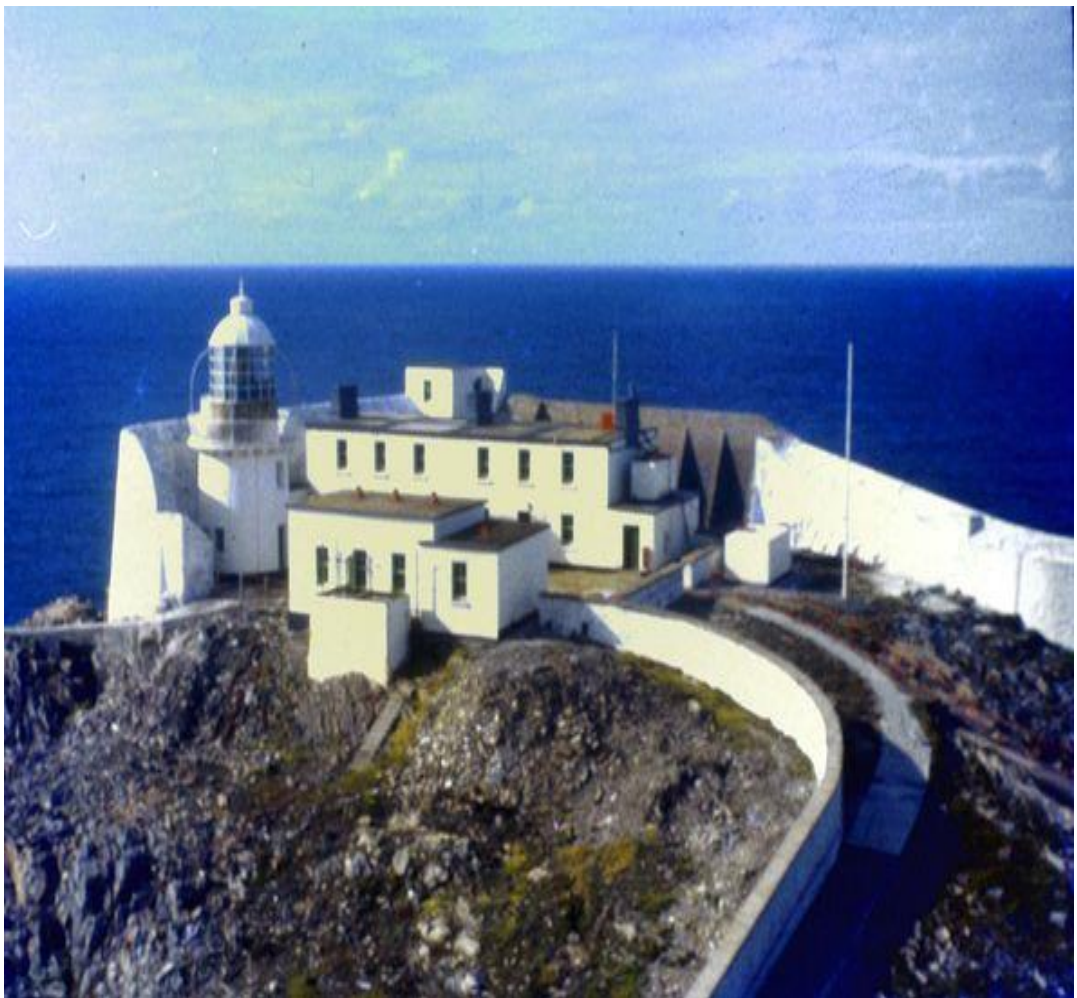


The yellow dumper truck outside the shed above the South landing (detail from a Richard Cummins photo)

The 1970s

*'Twas in Feb-u-ree of seventy-three
That we came to old Blacksod,
Where there isn't a tree in the scenery,
Deserted by man and God.
To land diesel oil onto Eagle's soil
We waited for many a day,
Then up got the swell and we rolled like hell,
So we sailed for Elly Bay.*

- Opening verse of the poem-song *Elly Bay* by C. Myles-Hook, reprinted in *Beam* 5.1



The West station in the 1970s. Note the beautiful dome. (Photo by Al Hamilton)

Stormy Seas

A crew member of the *Maravia*, a Spanish fishing vessel, received a hand injury while off Eagle Island. He was landed at Broadhaven and transferred to hospital in Belmullet – *Western People*, Saturday 4th September 1971

There were steel shutters on the windows at the back of the house, not the front, says 1970s keeper Al Hamilton. The sea would roar and then suddenly there'd be a silence and you knew you were in trouble. There'd be a terrible crash and I remember standing in the hallway of the cottage and the water was spurting through the gap all around the door. For it to do that, it must have filled up the yard, if only for a millisecond, before it swept away.

I heard about one-ton capstones being dislodged from the storm wall in the eighties. I never saw anything like that in the seventies.

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
Joseph Stapleton	1969-72		Charles Meehan	1968-71
Jim Leyden	1972		Thomas Roddy	1968-71
Thomas Hyde	1972		Charles Hernan	1969-72
Francis Ryan	1972-77		Ciarán O'Bráín	1971-72
PJ McCrohan	1976-77		John Coughlan	1971-72
John Gallagher	1977-86		Robert Boyers	1972
Bill Scanlan	1978		John Gallagher	1972-77
Oliver Crowley	1979-85		Peter O'Boyle	1972
			Eugene O'Sullivan	1972-73
			Al Hamilton	1973-78
			James Cullen	1973-78
SAK			William Heneghan	1976-87
Noel McCurdy	c.1970		PP O'Connor	1978-81
Robert Neill	c.1970		Michael Kneafsy	1978-81
Gerry Butler	c.1970		Vincent Sweeney	1978-81

When we said farewell to the Swinging Sixties, Joe Stapleton was the principal keeper on Eagle Island and he remained in position until 1972, which turned out to be a year of great tragedy for the lighthouse community, not merely on the rock or in Erris but nationally.

Jim Leyden had been assistant keeper at Eagle Island in the late 1950s. Born into a seafaring Sligo family, he had been one of the survivors of the *Arandora Star* tragedy in 1940 when the British ship, carrying Italian and German detainees to America, was torpedoed and sunk in the east Atlantic. Forsaking a life on the rolling wave for a life near it instead, Jim became a keeper. After a three-year stint in charge of the Fastnet, he arrived

at Eagle Island as principal keeper in January 1972. Tragically, his tenure was to be a very short one.

On Saturday 8th July, three young men set out from Rosses Point in Sligo in a recently purchased motorboat to do a spot of lobster fishing. Near the Blackrock lighthouse, the boat got washed onto the rocks. The men scrambled ashore, opened the door of the automatic lighthouse and set off flares. These were seen and a young man came out and picked them up and brought them back to the mainland, where they were taken to hospital.

Meanwhile, a group of their friends decided to retrieve the boat from the rocks. As low tide was deemed the best time to do it, they set out near midnight. Just as they turned in towards the rocks and gigantic wave appeared out of nowhere, capsizing the boat and sending all six men into the water. Sadly, three – including Jim, at home on leave – were drowned.

As a stop-gap measure, Thomas Hyde, who had been Eagle Island's PK in the late sixties was drafted back in to hold the fort at Eagle Island while Irish Lights rejigged their personnel.

Later that year, **Francis James 'Frank' Ryan (385)** took over the reins on the rock. A veteran keeper, it would be his final posting. Born in Carrickfergus in 1917 to lightkeeper Francis James Ryan and Ellen McCuskea, it was inevitable that he should follow the profession of the generations that came before him.

Frank, as he was known, spent twelve years in the pile lighthouse at Dundalk and also had put in a decent amount of time at Blackrock, Mayo. An avid reader and a fine creator of model ships, he was quietly spoken and reserved but always willing to help and encourage the younger generations of keepers who served under him. He retired in 1977, aged 60, and returned to his adopted homeland of Dundalk, where he lived until his death in March 1998.

In Frank's final year, Eagle Island got a second principal keeper, due to the roster changeover to four weeks on and four weeks off. So, in 1976, **P.J. 'Paddy' McCrohan (480)** joined the team, if only for a year. Paddy was from the now unpopulated Beginish Island just across from the lighthouse at Valentia in county Kerry, where his family were fishermen, pilots, farmers and rowers. He was himself an oarsman and a rower of repute and was regarded by all who knew him as a true gentleman. A strong family man, he neither drank nor smoked and in fact he didn't have a day's illness in his life until the day he dropped dead at Ballycotton lighthouse on 23rd February 1981 at the tragically young age of 52.

Following Frank's retirement, the PK position was taken over by John Patrick Gallagher, son of John and Nora Gallagher from Corclough whose family had operated the lighthouse boat tender for over one hundred years. He had spent five years here when a rookie recruit in 1956 and this second coming was to last nine years.

As mentioned, the rosters of the lightkeepers were changed to four weeks on, four weeks off. This naturally increased the number of keepers required at each light. When there had been a roster of six weeks on duty, two weeks off, only four keepers were required, with the keeper on shore leave rotating in order every two weeks.

However, under the new system, a second team of three keepers was required, to cover the first team of three when they went ashore. With two teams of one PK and two AKs in

each, the number of keepers per station increased to six and the number of PKs from one to two.

Thus, one of the first second PKs (so to speak) to roll up to the Mullet was **Peter W. Scanlan (473)**, more commonly known as Bill.

Bill had been born at Galley Head in 1930 when his father, Thomas, was stationed there. His mother, Isabella, was a member of the famous Higginbotham lightkeeping dynasty. As Thomas was a second-generation keeper himself, it was perhaps inevitable that Bill should continue the family association with Irish Lights but he did so in a rather unusual manner. Firstly, he joined the lighthouse depot as an improver, where he acquired some basic engineering skills, as well as a problem-solving approach to breakdowns, both of which would serve him well in his subsequent career. Following that, he spent eighteen months on the Irish Lights tender *Granuaile*, aboard which he visited most of the lighthouses around the coast. In June 1951, he became a lightkeeper proper and was sent off to Ballycotton.

Twenty-seven years later, at the end of May 1978, Bill swanned up to Eagle Island as principal keeper. There, he was described as *a very intelligent man and a stickler for cleanliness – a great conversationalist*. He stayed for sixteen months before departing for Loop Head in September 1979. Speaking many years later, he specifically remembered that *Eagle Island had its eerie silence before the sea broke over the forty-foot-high wall*.

Bill stayed at Loop Head until 1990 when he retired. A keen maritime historian, he continued his interest when he moved to Galway. He was a member, and later president, of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society, a supporter of the Galway City Museum collection and was integral to the Mutton Island lighthouse restoration programme. He died in 2021.

Al Hamilton tells a story about working for Bill on Eagle.

Once the helicopters came in during 1969, the man-derrick down at the landing place was very rarely used. But aside from the annual inspection by the commissioners, you might also get a quarterly inspection, so you had to be ready for all eventualities.

One time, probably around 1977, we got word that the Granuaile was anchored in Blacksod Bay, which raised the possibility that the commissioners might want to pay us a visit in the near future. Normally they'd come in by helicopter but there was always the possibility that the helicopter couldn't go.

'Should we practice the man-derrick thing, just in case it's foggy?' I said to Billy Scanlan, who was the P.K. at the time.

I could see Billy didn't think it was necessary but we walked down there anyway. As we got there, it was obvious that the man-derrick was rusting away. Billy took one look. 'Ah, f___ it!' he said and we turned around and walked back up the hill.

Anyway, word came down the next morning that the commissioners were on their way and they'd be coming on to the island via the man-derrick. The sea was a little bit choppy and some of the commissioners were quite elderly so we went down the island to get the place ready.

So anyway, they came in and the other two stayed up above to operate the derrick while I went down to haul them in. Anyway, the first person came across and it was Richie Ryan, the Minister of Finance. And he was swinging about and the lads were pulling the guy rope like mad but I couldn't quite reach him to pull him in. Eventually I managed to grab a hold of the seat – it was a big circular seat, and pulled him in. 'Well done, thank you,' he said to me as he got off.

And so it continued. One by one, they came in and were left swinging for a while before I got them ashore. I wasn't the tallest, you see, and we really should have practised! Last to come ashore was Captain Greenlee. As he passed by Billy up by the derrick, he said, 'That was a disgraceful exhibition.' Later on, he took Billy aside and told him in no uncertain terms that he should have practised beforehand. 'We did practise it!' insisted Billy and nothing could move him.

Taking over from Bill Scanlan in 1979 was **Oliver F. Crowley (513)**. Oliver was born in Clifden county Galway in June 1935, while his father John (and indeed his uncle Daniel) were stationed at Slyne Head. His grandfather Henry had also been a lightkeeper and his great-grandfather, Daniel, a Crimean War veteran, had been a coastguard.

Oliver's younger brother, (by one year!) John Noel also became a keeper of long-standing. Joining Irish Lights in 1955, Oliver was 44 years old when he joined the team on Eagle Island on 1st November 1979. Eight weeks later, on the last day of the decade, he was promoted *in situ* to principal keeper.

Oliver told a story in the *Wexford Oral History Recordings* at the Hook Head gathering of 2013 about keepers being provided with a decent medical kit. One time on Eagle, he said, a keeper was complaining of 'the dia-ree' and asked Oliver to get him something. Oliver duly went through the cabinet and picked out the very thing for the ailment and handed it over with instructions of use.

After a week there was no improvement in the poor man's affliction and they were stumped as to how to proceed. After much suggesting and musing, the afflicted man suddenly exclaimed, *Ah no, it's not the dia-ree, its constipation. I always get confused between the two!*

Oliver retired from Roches Point in 1995 after 39 years' service when that light became automated. *It cannot be a good thing*, he told the *Irish Examiner* at the time. *It creates unemployment. It will be weird having a lighthouse without a lighthouse keeper. I think we'll be missed by the locals and the fishermen at sea will miss us. I think they always knew that if anything went wrong for them, there was a great chance that the lighthouse keeper would see it.*

Oliver, who never married, was a highly accomplished oil painter. A garrulous and well-liked keeper, he passed away in 2017.

Moving on to the AKs, sixth-generation keeper **Ciarán O'Briáin (570)** was *in situ* in 1971 and 1972, having been promoted in August 1970. An artist of some repute, his specialty was, unsurprisingly, seascapes and he later gave classes in the subject and exhibited his work wherever he served around the country. His father, Seaghan, also a keeper, had been born on the Beeves Rock and he himself had been born at the Hook. *Seagulls' eggs, that's*

what we are, he said. *Keepers who were born where their fathers were stationed.* Seaghan's father, John, had been a crewman on a tugboat in Manhattan when he heard that Irish Lights were recruiting and high-tailed it back.

Eugene O'Leary says that when he worked in the Baily, Ciarán used to supplement his income by carving the Venus de Milo into bars of Irish Lights soap and then selling them in the pubs in Howth!

Ciarán recounts a story on Eagle when the relief was a week late due to the weather. *On one occasion we were eight or nine days overdue*, he says, *when the sea calmed down enough to make the relief. And Ted Sweeney came on from Blacksod, saying that Anthony's crew had gone into Belmullet for their dole and weren't available to make the relief. Even Tom Hyde was cursing!*

A keeper since the early 1960s, Ciarán later became the principal keeper charged with the sad task of locking up the Mizen Head lighthouse when it became automatic in 1993.

He does not appear on the Pelly list but there is a strong possibility that **John Edward Histon (607)** spent some time on the island in 1971. The only pointer to this is that the *Sunday Independent* of 2nd May that year which profiled his father, Patrick Histon, who had crossed the Shannon 6,000 times in the previous two years. (In case you were wondering if he had some kind of syndrome, he was in fact the pilot of the Tarbert-Killimer car ferry. The article went on to say that the nearest his children had come to following him in a life on the ocean wave, was his son John, who was at that time, a lightkeeper on Eagle Island.) John was an RAK (Relief Assistant Keeper, (same as a probationary or supernumerary keeper but easier to say than either) at the time and was promoted to AK in June 1973.

John Coughlan (484) had been born in December 1940 and had joined Irish Lights as a twenty-one-year-old in 1952. He was at Eagle Island in 1971 and 1972 and would be promoted to principal keeper at the Hook four years later. A native of Kilrush, county Clare, he had spent time on the Fastnet, Mizen Head and Rathlin O'Beirne.

And so we come to **Robert Walpole 'Bob' Boyers (526)** who arrived on Eagle Island in 1972. A thirty-seven-year-old father of four, Bob lived in the Dublin suburb of Raheny, not far from Howth. His son, Alan, recalls his father saying that when a storm was raging on Eagle and waves crashing down into the yard, they would have to wait until a wave hit the storm wall and then run across the yard to the coal shed and count, waiting for the next hit. And then scuttle back again.

Bob hated the middle name Walpole (there had been a British prime minister with that name) but it came in handy when he had served in Northern Ireland during the Troubles!

Principal Keeper Thomas Hyde, who had come back to Eagle after the tragic death of Jim Leyden, lived in Howth and naturally Bob would get a lift home from Thomas when the pair came off shift.

On Friday 17th November that year, the helicopter brought the pair ashore and they set off for the capital. Ciarán O'Bríaín waved them off from the island. It was a snowy day and the coastline glistened white up and down the coast. *Sure, we'll be safe enough*, said Bob. *Tom's a very slow driver.*

Unfortunately, when the pair got as far as Carrowkeel, near Crossmolina, they were rounding a dangerous bend, when Thomas lost control of the car and it skidded across the road and into the front of an oncoming sand truck. The car was embedded in the truck as far as the steering wheel. Tom, who was 55 years old, was seriously injured but

unfortunately Bob didn't make it. Sean O'Donnell, who was AK at Blackrock, was, coincidentally, passing by and helped to organise emergency aid from Ballina.

The stretch of road was well-known in the locality as being an accident black spot and was near the spot where Tom Roddy had crashed his car the previous year. Not only was it the second accidental death of an Eagle Island keeper in the space of a few months but, like Jim Leyden, Bob had also been a native of Rosses Point in county Sligo.

Years later, Ciarán was in a bar in Kiltimagh, county Mayo, with some keepers and a man who had heard their conversation came over. He had been the driver of the truck. The accident had affected him deeply through the years and he was sure that the keepers all blamed him for Bob's death.

John Gallagher came back again on one of his long stays at his local station, this time staying for five years. He was joined in 1972 by Claremorris man **Peter John O'Boyle (569)** on another stopgap assignment while the terrible aftermath of the tragedy was sorted out. Born in 1944, PJ had joined Irish Lights as a twenty-year-old in 1964, rising to assistant keeper at the Tuskar in 1970. He would later lock up Slyne Head lighthouse after automation in 1990 and did the same for the Tuskar in the early 1990s.

I was stationed on Eagle with PJ and found him to be a great colleague, says Al Hamilton. I learned so much from him about carpentry during that time. He and I shared an interest in woodwork, electronics, radio, mechanical stuff and, later, computers. He was always fixing or making stuff. I remember in particular him making two builders' step ladders as he was building his own house in Claremorris. I mean blockwork, carpentry and roofing with his own hands!

Following the death of Bob Boyers, **Eugene O'Sullivan (537)** was drafted in as a replacement. The middle lightkeeping son of keeper/naturalist and poet DJ O'Sullivan (Hugh and Donal are also Eagle Island old boys), Eugene had been born in 1940 and joined the family business in 1960.

Although he was only on Eagle for six months, he used his time very profitably by creating a rudimentary pitch and putt course on the sloping contours of the fourteen acres. This was the course that Bill Long describes as being destroyed by a subsequent storm in his book *Bright Lights White Water*.

Moville-based Eugene went on to achieve lasting fame on 24th March 1997 when he formally handed over the keys of Ireland's last manned lighthouse, the Baily, and brought centuries of Irish lightkeeping to a close. *At least I'll be able to get in a few games of golf now*, he quipped at the time.

Though clearly not on Eagle.

Between 1973 and 1978, **Alexander M. 'Al' Hamilton (598)** put in five years on the rock. One of the last of a long and illustrious line of keepers that dated back to Rickard Hamilton who joined the service in 1866 and served on Eagle in 1871, Al was the son of William R. Hamilton and had joined the dynasty as a nineteen-year-old keeper in 1968. The following year he was sent to Eagle as an SAK.

So, I went to Blacksod and got into a helicopter, and off to Eagle Island expecting to be home for Christmas. Alas! A week before Christmas the keeper due on called in sick, so I had to spend Christmas on the station. When the next relief was due another keeper called in sick, so again I had to remain for another 2 weeks. All in all, I spent six weeks on, missing Christmas, the New Year and my 21st birthday. The only good side of it was that after being

so long away and not being able to spend any money, I treated myself to a new motorbike when I finally got home.

In 1973, Al revisited the island as an assistant keeper. He would stay for five years.

On the day I was told I was going to be a father, Paddy McCrohan, the PK, a lovely man, broke out a bottle of medicinal whiskey, he says. Paddy wasn't a drinker himself but it was a lovely gesture.

I remember one time a helicopter spent a half a day delivering scaffolding to the island. He picked it up from Dún na mBó (on the mainland) and carried it in a big net slung underneath. When it arrived on the island, I was told to get underneath the helicopter and unhook the net. When this was done, we then removed the scaffolding and returned the empty net. The helicopter had to make several runs to transport all the scaffolding over.

Anyway, the principal keeper came over to me afterwards and he wasn't happy with me and my efforts underneath the helicopter, even though I could barely stand up with the wind. So, Jimmy Cullen, who was working there as well launched into him, saying he couldn't talk to me like that. That was Jimmy. Even though he was my junior, he still stood up for me. Later on, he became secretary of the Lighthouse Keepers' Union.

Al had a very mechanical mind and had a great curiosity in how things worked. He was one of the inventors of the storm-wall-painting mechanism that revolutionised that particular job in the mid-seventies. He was also one of that strange breed of individuals that considered it a good idea to go swimming in the sea on Christmas Day. On Eagle Island, because of the swell, anybody so deranged as to wish to do this had to have one end of a rope tied around them and the other end tied to the landing, with a keeper in attendance to pull him in if necessary.

Although keepers were generally told where they would be sent, it was possible, in later years, to engineer a swap with another keeper, if both parties were willing. So, in 1978, Blacksod native Vincent Sweeney, down on the Hook, and Al swapped places.

I did two years in Hook Head in Wexford, an onshore station and then three years in Ballycotton from 1980 to 1983. I then went to Rockabill in Co Dublin until 1988. Next, I went to the Baily in Dublin until 1993, another onshore job. After that, I went to Mew Island in Belfast Lough for one year and was made redundant in 1994.

James Martin 'Jimmy' Cullen (611) did a very similar stint on the island as Al Hamilton (1973-78). Born in 1951, Jimmy joined Irish Lights as a twenty-year-old and was promoted from RAK at the Baily to assistant keeper on Eagle Island on 1st October 1973. He then spent another twenty years travelling around the country to twenty-five different lighthouses until automation took its inevitable toll. A fifth-generation keeper, he later bought the Templars Inn near Hook Head, where he served for seven years (at the Hook, not the bar!)

On 15th October 1976, a man who, along with John P. Gallagher, will always be associated with Eagle Island, was transferred there as an AK for the first time. As it happened, he wouldn't leave the station until it was automated twelve years later. **William F. 'Billy' Heneghan (518)** was the son of Blacksod merchant, Anthony 'Sonny' Heneghan, whose family had been involved, in one way or another and in one country or another, with lighthouses since the early nineteenth century. A large, soft-spoken man, he nevertheless

had a great sense of humour, great local knowledge and was highly regarded in lightkeeping circles.

Born in 1934, he was 42 years of age when he came to Eagle as assistant keeper, after fifteen years of service. He was 54 years old when, as principal keeper, he locked the door for the last time and, with two companions and boarded the helicopter for the mainland, leaving the island deserted for the first time in over 150 years. Billy passed away in 2023.

Padraig Pearse 'Paud' O'Connor (527) was also 42 years of age when he arrived on the rock in February 1978. A native of Wicklow town, he had won a commendation the year before for his part in rescuing a man trapped at the bottom of a cliff in Howth, while he was serving on the Baily. He was described as being 'one of a kind' and 'a good shipmate.' In December 1981, he was transferred on promotion to principal keeper to Inishtearaght, the outermost of the Blasket Islands.

Covering the same period (1978-81), **Michael Kneafsy (603)** was born in 1950 and joined Irish Lights as a sprightly nineteen-year-old in 1969. After four years as an SAK, he became an AK in 1973 and served later at Inishtrahull, Mizen Head and Mew Island, among others. He was made redundant on 31st March 1995 after 25 years' service.

Vincent M. Sweeney (651) completed the triumvirate of keepers who made the light shine from 1978 to 1981. A Blacksod native, he later became attendant of that lighthouse and was the first person to raise the alarm in the Rescue 116 tragedy, when the helicopter failed to return to the base in the early hours of 14th March 2017. A son of long-time Blacksod attendant Ted Sweeney, he joined the Eagle Island crew on 5th August 1978, aged 24 in a swap with Al Hamilton. With his father and brother, Gerry, they were the first to help transatlantic rower, Tom McClean, to come ashore at Blacksod in 1969.

At the start of the 1970s, **Noel McCurdy (602)** made three separate, month-long trips to Eagle Island as an SAK. They ran consecutively, as in four weeks on, two weeks off, four weeks on, two weeks off, four weeks on. Unusually for a junior keeper, he describes Eagle as one of the best stations on the coast.

Apart from the normal chores, the only real work we had to do was to maintain the aerial hoists for a year or two after the helicopters came in, he says. Somebody down in Head Office had devised a contraption for greasing the wires on the hoist and they put it on a ship and sent it down. Some of the lads on the ship christened it Apollo – it was just after the moon landing, you see – and someone had painted this on the side.

Tom Roddy said we had to grease the wire rope but he said he didn't fancy operating the machine. And the other keeper didn't want to do it either. So they asked me. Said I could say no if I wanted but sure. So up I went. It wasn't dangerous because there were that many ropes around me. It all worked by motor, or rather, it didn't. I was hitched up, pulled up the bucket, released the grease from the gun and set off down the rope. I did about a yard and then it stopped. So we gave it up for a dead loss and that was the end of Apollo.

On two of the three occasions that Noel went to Eagle, he stayed in Belmullet prior to heading to the island, but on one occasion, there was an emergency on Blackrock (Mayo) and a keeper had to be airlifted off.

It was the day after we'd all been to a festival in Howth, Noel remembers, and there were a lot of sore heads around. Some guys were heading back into town when a call came through that they needed somebody to get to Eagle Island immediately. Of course, I

volunteered and I had to get my provisions, grab my stuff and head down to the airport, where I caught a helicopter to Blacksod.

When we arrived at Blacksod, we had a quick cup of coffee with the Sweeneys and then set off for Eagle. We had been told in Blacksod that nobody had been able to get through to Eagle all day, so they weren't expecting us. Well, we got there and there was nobody about, so we circled over the accommodation block and some figures appeared, so we flew back down to the helipad. I got out with all my stuff and had to tell one of the keepers he had to grab his own bed-bag and clothes, get in the helicopter and fly to Blackrock!

Noel says that Messrs. Stapleton, Roddy and Meehan were on Eagle at the time. He also mentions another keeper, **Robert Neill (584)** from Foxford, whose tenure on Eagle was probably quite short, as his name doesn't appear on the Pelly list. Robert was born in 1943, joined Irish Lights in 1966 and was made assistant keeper in 1969. His death in 2012 was recorded in *Beam 40*, the very last death listed in the last edition of that much-missed journal.

Gerry Butler (604) was also an SAK on Eagle at the start of the seventies. Synonymous with Galley Head, where he is attendant, he followed in the footsteps of his father, Larry, who served on Eagle in the forties. He was also on the Fastnet during the tragic yacht race there in 1979. A lighthouse historian of some renown, his autobiography *The Lightkeeper* is a must for any Irish pharologist.



*Oliver Crowley (above left)
Bill Scanlan (above
right)
Ciarán O'Briáin (left)
Paud O'Connor (right)*





*(Clockwise from
top left)*

*Al Hamilton; Eugene
O'Sullivan; Jimmy Cullen;
Noel and Teresa McCurdy;
PJ O'Boyle; Gerald Butler*





*Vincent Sweeney with
some admirers*

The 1970s

By the 1970s, the writing was really on the three-foot thick storm wall about the advance of automation and the knowledge that the job of every lightkeeper was doomed. Despite the countless thousands of lives that had been saved down through the years through the alertness of the keepers, this all required money and Irish Lights had precious little of it. The argument that an automated switch could not detect an overturned fishing boat a mile from land did not, like the boat itself, hold water.

But the automation of nearby Blackrock in 1974 would have brought it all a little nearer home. The two sea-lashed Mullet sentinels had watched over that sector of the North Atlantic coastline for many years and now one was being relieved of its human presence. The fact that the light would be operated from a switch on Eagle would have been all the more poignant. Many Eagle keepers had done time on Blackrock and now there was nobody to fix leaks, or polish the brass, or repair a window pane that had been broken, or spot a listing pleasure boat in the ocean swell.

But sure, weren't they saving a lot of money?

The age-old problem of illegal fishing within Ireland's territorial limits surfaced again in the 1970s. The richness of our maritime harvest – which could be explained by its proximity to the edge of the continental shelf – was a great temptation to foreign trawlers who could make a killing (or ten thousand of them) in an hour or two and be gone.

To combat this, Irish patrol vessels had begun to regularly police the western coasts. So it was that in June 1975, the *L.E. Grainne*, which was off Eagle Island at the time, spotted a French trawler fishing inside the six-nautical-mile limit. As she approached her prey – which turned out to be the *Miss Trudel*, a £250,000 French trawler from Lorient – she marked its position as being 1.1 miles inside the limit. Four minutes later, she was still seven tenths of a mile inside the limit and after another four minutes, she began to haul in her fishing gear.

Lieutenant Commander Patrick A. Kavanagh signalled to the trawler to *Stop or I'll fire* which the captain of the trawler, Jouanno Theophile, wisely did. An ensign then boarded the trawler and placed the captain under arrest, ordering him to follow the *Grainne* to Killybegs. As the trawler hauled in his gear, the ensign noticed that there was *a bag of fish*

in the nets. Presumably this was not simply a sealed bag of fillets that you might buy in your local supermarket.

On arrival at Killybegs, the trawler was again boarded and the catch and fishing gear examined. Among the catch were found *four undersized fish* (maybe it was a sealed bag of fillets!) and three nets which were 5mm under the regulated size. He was charged with entering the six-mile exclusive limit, fishing within the exclusive limit, attempting to fish within the exclusive limit, fishing for undersized fish and having an undersized net.

Through an interpreter, le capitain said that at no time was he inside the exclusive limit. He saw the *Grainne* and wasn't in the least bit bothered because he knew he was outside it. His nets, he said, had been inspected by the French ministry and he was quite certain they were okay. Under questioning, he admitted that perhaps the boat had strayed into the six-mile exclusion limit but the nets were always outside it.

After consultation, four of the five charges were dropped and, on the charge of fishing within the exclusive limit, Monsieur Theophile was fined £10,000 and made to forfeit his fish and fishing gear. He handed over a cheque for that amount in court.

Whereas encroachment into the six-mile limit was a serious affair as it affected the livelihood of local and Irish fishermen, one surmises that *Miss Trudel's* captain, on reading the French version of the *Irish Press* on 22nd July the following year, would have thrown up his arms in exasperation.

The fleet of Russian and Armenian trawlers which on Monday trespassed more than two miles into the Irish fisheries limit, was still trawling off Eagle Island, Mayo, the report began.

Seemingly, as soon as the naval corvette *Deirdre* left the area early on Monday morning, a fleet of twenty trawlers plus a factory ship moved in. The trawlers which were around 170 tons each scattered out over a large area which meant that the Killybegs trawlers, which had been fishing there, were forced to leave the area or their nets would have been destroyed. The factory ship remained outside the limits as the trawlers unloaded their catches and returned for more fish.

A spokesman for the Irish Fisherman's Association said that the Killybegs trawlers had lost roughly £20,000 through the invasion. There were plenty of herring, he said, but by scattering out in a large area, the shoals were separated and fishing was made much harder. A formal protest was made to the Naval Service which must have put the fear of God into the Russians.

But there was even further trouble for the fishermen that same year when, in November, local man Brendan Doherty from Rosspport was fined £18 for fishing with two excessively long nets off Eagle Island. The fisheries protection vessel *Banba* caught the heinous criminal fishing with nets measuring 4,600 yards instead of the regulation 800 yards and not having a licence to fish. *Our fishing waters are being attacked from inside as well as outside*, declared the prosecuting counsel, somewhat melodramatically.

The national limit of six nautical miles was increased to a 200-nautical-mile limit on 1st January 1977. However, this was an EEC initiative, creating a shared community area which meant that Ireland was expected to police this huge extended area and European fishermen had access to Irish waters. Ireland's response was to buy a plane to cover the 130,000 square miles of sea under our jurisdiction. Despite this needle-in-a-haystack solution, the twin-engined turbo-prop Super King Air 200 Beechcraft was often seen above Eagle Island as it arrived at the Atlantic from its base at Baldonnel.

For the local fishermen, out in the currach, there was hope in store by the end of the decade as the Atlantic Ocean offered up a two-for-one offer on its fish.

According to the *Western People* (13th October 1979), the three Lavelle brothers, John Dominick and Paddy, were fishing off Eagle Island when they caught a 'sea-devil,' as the paper headlined it.

One of the brothers, Paddy, described the fish as not like a skate but had a very big head, short, thin tail, with two wings under the stomach, with an angled big mouth. He said it swallowed a ten-pound red bream.

'It is not usual for a fish taken aboard to swallow another fish,' said Paddy. In all their years of fishing experience, they had never seen such a type of fish."

Even in the 1970s, the age-old problem of how to get fresh drinking water had still not been solved. Al Hamilton again.

We had a large Trueburn range in the kitchen. One side of it, you could put water in and it would heat up the water for you. Great big thing. Took a huge amount of coal which had to be hauled up by hand of course.

There was a water tank on the roof for collecting rainwater. If you wanted to know if the water was okay to drink, you'd go up there with a jug or cup and come down and pour it on the range. If it left a residue, you'd know it wasn't good enough. But once it left no mark, you could go ahead and fill the tanks.

In December 1978, both the *Western Journal* and the *Connaught Telegraph* related the information that one of the keepers on the island had been injured in an accident and a helicopter had airlifted him first to Belmullet District Hospital, where they picked up Nurse Dora McDonald, and then to Castlebar Hospital. Helpfully, neither publication revealed the keeper's name but it was PK John P. Gallagher of Corclough. He had suffered very bad injuries when the lower part of the derrick on the landing stage caught him unexpectedly. On arrival at Castlebar, his whole torso was bandaged up as he had suffered cracked ribs among other things. To make matters worse, he then reacted to the penicillin he was given. Somehow, he recovered!

Beasts of the Sea

As far back as the sixteenth century, the Dutch fishing fleets came to the west coast of Ireland to profit from the valuable sea harvest there. Articles of Dutch manufacture found on the Mullet peninsula attest to this and there is little doubt that the sea around Eagle Island provided a rich source of fish. As has been mentioned, its proximity to the edge of the continental shelf may not have played a large part in the formation of storms and towering seas but there is certainly evidence to suggest, not just at Eagle but around the world, that the sudden change from extreme ocean depths to relatively coastal shallowness can result in a whole miasma of marine biology, from large shoals to weird and wonderful creatures.

Whales, of course, are, or rather were, plentiful along the coast of western Ireland. In the eighteenth century, the mechanical harpoon was invented in Donegal Bay just to the north and a whaling station was established on South Inniskea in 1908. This short-lived venture landed mainly blue whales, fin whales and sperm whales. It effectively closed

down in 1914 and attempts to relaunch the enterprise after WW1 were ultimately unsuccessful.

In 2005, a maritime mammal monitoring report mentioned that a single Cuvier's beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*) had been sighted from a helicopter just south of Eagle Island. Although not threatened by extinction, it is extremely rare to find them so close to land in the North Atlantic.

Gerry Sweeney says September is a great month for watching whales passing Eagle. They are usually seen coming from the north, heading south.

He also says seals are plentiful off the Erris coast and why wouldn't they be, with a large colony based on South Inniskea. Occasionally, Gerry would go fishing down around the east landing. If the sea was anyway high at all, he'd fish from above on the rocks, as the waves would be liable to wash you off. This time, however, he came down to the landing and there was a big bull seal lying there, wearing a poncho. Obviously, it wasn't an actual poncho but he'd obviously stuck his head through a bit of a trawl net at some stage. *I couldn't even try to help him out of it, says Gerry. Big bull seal like that'd rip your arm off.* Apparently, the Clint Eastwood seal was well-known around the local fishing community.

The Lough Ree Sub Aqua Club visited in August 2020 and did two dives on the shoreward side of the island to approximately 40 meters. They reported there were plenty of large shoals.

In fact, the whole west Mullet coastline is apparently teeming with fish, yet many guidebooks say that there is not much angling activity there, despite the fact that a catch is virtually guaranteed with every throw of the line. From the shoreline to the north and south of Scotchport, a great variety of fish may be had, though the journey there can often be a bit of a scramble and the foul and kelp-strewn waters can occasionally result in lost bait or sinkers. In addition, the huge swells, which may have been mentioned once or twice in this book, are extremely dangerous and have indeed taken a number of anglers down the years.

Flatfish such as flounder are abundant, as well as gurnard, mackerel, wrasse, conger and bull huss. Coalfish and pollack can also be taken.

It is said that mackerel often shoal close to Annagh Head in the summer months. Fishing with a float is good for the wrasse and coalfish, while baits attached to sinkers will attract conger, bull huss, rockling and dogfish. From Frenchport, sea angling trips are occasionally organised and are rewarded with excellent catches of ling, whiting, haddock, pollack, cod, wrasse, turbot, ray and coalfish.

The big news in sea fishing around Eagle Island, said the *Belfast Telegraph* in their 18th May 1990 edition was the return of the once plentiful haddock to the area. A recent trip there by the Belmullet SAC yielded a good, if surprising, catch of this popular fish.

As has been mentioned, crayfish are abundant and are harvested in large numbers. The legend that was Patrick Kilker – he was also a member of the Scotchport boat tender for many years – was claimed to have made a record catch of the crustacean in 1959, according to the *Mayo News* of 29th April that year.

While fishing for lobsters and crayfish off the Erris coast at Eagle Island, Mr. Patrick Kilker, Gladree, made what is believed to be a record catch of crayfish. After rowing his currach alone for six miles and with only ten pots, he captured thirty-seven crayfish in four and a half hours near Eagle Island lighthouse. He sold some of the fish to the lightkeepers and

disposed of the remainder in Blacksod at £5 per dozen. Mr. Kilker has for many years been the Erris champion fisherman.

Less marketable but more spectacular than the crayfish are the jewel anemones found on the natural wall beneath the lighthouse and sub aqua clubs report a large cave on the northwest of the island, with an array of interesting wildlife.

The keepers on the island along with the tradesmen and technicians were also fulsome in their praise of the bountiful harvest to be got from the sea.

I used to enjoy going fishing on Eagle,” said Louis Cronin, SAK in the early 1980s. The best spot was just to the left of the east landing. You could get three or four 5 or 6lb pollocks there a day if the tides were right. Then you’d fillet them and freeze them. You might have three stone of fish going off the island and you’d hand them out to family and friends when you got home. The best fish – you knew they were fresh.

There was great fishing to be had too in the summertime, both at the north and the south landing, whichever was more suitable, agreed painter Andy Newman. *Mackerel and pollock were there for the taking.* However, the art of retrieving these wonderful creatures from the seas around Eagle Island is not necessarily the preserve of local boatmen such as the Lavelles, nor indeed the hardy amateur with an old spark plug for a sinker, as the Mayo News reported on 23rd January 1965.

Widespread havoc was caused throughout Erris on Sunday. At the height of the storm, an extraordinary phenomenon was witnessed at Gladree near Belmullet. Hundreds of fish were blown onto dry land and the local people had one of their best fishing days of their lives. Lobsters, crayfish, glossan, pollack, conger, ling and codfish made up their mixed dish. A local man, Mr. Patrick Kilker (who else?) had to be rushed for medical treatment when he wrestled to overcome a huge conger eel on the shore. A lobster weighing 12¼ lbs was taken by Mr. John Ruddy, another well-known sea-angler.

As Lenny Hartley commented, *He must have been brave or daft to wrestle a conger eel. Those things are seriously dangerous. They will still snap at you hours after being landed.*



Al Hamilton on the Redifon High Frequency radio-phone on Eagle in 1974. The HF frequencies used were; General Lighthouse Communication on 1662.5 KHz; Distress on 2182 KHz; Helicopter Comms on 5316 KHz. High Frequency was used until the 1980s when Sailor VHF sets were installed at most stations.

The 1980s

"Of all the lighthouses on which I served, I found Eagle Island the most arduous."
Lightkeeper Don Scanlan on his retirement after forty years' service, *Irish Examiner* 10th October 1986

Stormy Seas

Two red flares were sighted by Eagle Island lightkeepers at 3.30am and the information was forwarded to the Shannon Marine Co-ordination Centre. At first light, a local boat and an Irish Air Corps helicopter swept the north Mayo coastline but, when nothing was found by 8.15am, the search was called off – *Evening Echo* 16th July 1985

A week later, the same paper reported that there was something that Duran Duran's Simon Le Bon should know, as his yacht, *Mazda Drum*, passed the Eagle Island marker point in the Cork Dry Gin Round Ireland race. The revised timings as they passed the island found that he was last of the 27 boats, rather than first, as had been imagined.

Not probably the 1980s, but John McIntyre of Barnatra returned home to Belmullet after a long absence. Recalling his early years in the area, he said that the one incident that came to mind was his narrow escape from drowning. He and some friends had been out in a boat fishing and got caught in a storm off Eagle Island. The boat was driven onto rocks at Glengad but the lads were rescued by boatmen from Porturlin. So traumatic was this, he said, that he had never ventured out in a boat since – *Western People* 10th September 1986.

In a similar vein, Paul Gaynard, of Belmullet, recalls a fishing trip in August 1989. *As a lad of sixteen, I went out in a curragh from Scotchport with three others. We went about a nautical mile west of the Eagle with the purpose of getting mackerel but we came across a shoal of pollack, so we ditched all the mackerel on board. In a curragh, you have two oarsmen and one doing the dropline to catch the fish. And a fourth, which was me at the time, with a small bucket to bail out the water. With the boat being out in the sun all day, it melts the tar and so there would be tiny holes in it. We had no life jackets and no GPS. We filled up and were heading back to Scotchport when we noticed a gigantic sea squall coming our way – a huge wall of blackness. The sea was calm so we were able to row back fast. It was bloody frightening. Even the thought of it now gives me goose pimples, I never went out again.* Paul naturally reflects on the bravery of the men of old who had to do that day after day just to eke out a living.

Minister of State of the Department of the Marine, Deputy Patrick Gallagher, said he had requested an immediate report into the problems that caused the drifting of the Nigerian fish factory ship Odon off Eagle Island, county Mayo yesterday.

He stated that the Odon was already detained last month at Rathmullen Harbour on the Donegal coast after officers from his department discovered in a spot check that some of the ship's safety equipment was not in order.

The drifting vessel was taken in tow last evening by two other trawlers. The vessel carried a ...crew of 35 seamen – Irish Independent 30th April 1988

The Keepers

PK	Year (s)		AK	Year(s)
John Gallagher	1977-86		William Heneghan	1976-87
Oliver Crowley	1979-85		PP O'Connor	1978-81
Michael Shannon	1985-88		Michael Kneafsy	1978-81
William Heneghan	1987-88		Vincent Sweeney	1978-81
SAK / Temp			Patrick Keane	1981-85
Richard Cummins	1980		Geoffrey McCarthy	1981-83
John Hamilton	1980		Derek O'Donnell	1981-83
Louis Cronin	c1980		George Cavanagh	1981-82
Alan Boyers	1985		Edward Copeland	1982-86
Nick Halpin	1985		John McCarthy	1982-88
Paul O'Farrell	1986		Gerald O'Byrne	1983-85
Noel Gaughan	1987		Daniel O'Sullivan	1985-88
Attendants			Michael Barry	1985-88
Daniel O'Sullivan	1988		Gerard Sweeney	1986-88
Gerard Sweeney	1988-96		Sean Doherty	1987-88
P.J. Gaughan (asst)	1988-96			

Richard Cummins (695) spent two separate months as an SAK on Eagle Island in the early 1980s. *On both occasions, it was winter and the weather was miserable. When you looked ashore from the island, it seemed a lot further away than it actually was because there were no houses in view. Billy Heneghan showed me to my accommodation. The bedroom, it was very dark because there were big steel shutters on the window.*

'How do you open them?' I asked.

'We don't,' he said. 'There's a storm due tomorrow.'

When the seas came in, it was a really wild place. They came in like mountains. It wasn't a place where you could stand outside and watch it. Billy had us all prepared beforehand. Anything that was outside had to be put inside. There were great big flagstones in the yard, as big as your car. They must have weighed tons and they were washed down the island. It was great. I have to say I enjoyed it. There were sheep on the island and you'd count them after a storm. We lost three of them when I was there.

Spending a month on Eagle as an SAK was **John Hamilton (674)**, grandson of Willie Hamilton, who was AK here in the late 1920s. *I was here in July, which was mostly calm and warm, says John. However, we did have one very bad stormy week, during which the Commissioners were due to visit. The seas were so bad onshore that the Granuaile had to steam out to twelve miles for calm enough water for helicopter operations. My abiding memory is of the Killybegs fishing fleet and some Greencastle boats passing the station on most evenings. I'd hazard a guess that they were the white fish fleet.*

Patrick Kevin ‘Padraig’ Keane (594) was 33 years old when he joined Eagle Island from the Tuskar on 10th April 1981, serving four years at the station. He had joined the service as a twenty-year-old and would retire in March 1996 after doing coast-relieving duties for a while. Sadly, he died in May 1997 aged just 49 years. (Not to be confused with Paddy Keane, Keeper 452, who died in Belmullet two weeks later.)

Geoffrey Francis McCarthy (663) was born in South Yorkshire in 1953 to Kerry parents. He began his working life as a secondary school teacher in Yorkshire. He enjoyed teaching but the staffroom politics had him pondering what might be next in his career. It was 1975, and around that same time his uncle, who was a lightkeeper at Ballycotton, told him about a recruitment drive at Irish Lights. *I came to Ireland to join the lighthouses specifically, he says. I think we were the third tranche of trainees that went through the lighthouse depot in Dun Laoghaire.*

He joined the firm in 1975 and was made an assistant keeper on 1st September 1981, with his first posting being to Eagle Island. Two years later, he was transferred to Bull Rock and later did time at the Mizen, where he has served as assistant for many years.

Derek Patrick O’Donnell (654) was at the station from 1981 to 1983. He arrived at 25 years of age after joining Irish Lights in 1974. In February 1983 he was transferred to Mew Island and from there to Tearaght one year later. He does not appear to have been in Irish Lights in 1991.

Slightly older, **George Francis Cavanagh (546)** was born back in 1937 and thus was 44 years old when he arrived in Blacksod to catch the helicopter to Eagle in 1981. In August the following year, he was transferred to Inishtrahull. He was on Rathlin Island in 1991. George nearly made it right to the very end – he retired from the Baily on 31st January 1997 two months to the day before the last six keepers locked up the Baily for the final time. From the Moville area of Donegal, he passed away in December 2016

Born in Wicklow town in August 1948, **Edward A. ‘Eddie’ Copeland (633)** decided to go travelling in Canada and Alaska for a number of years before coming home and getting ‘a real job’ with Irish Lights in May 1973. The following year, he was made an AK and he was transferred to Eagle on 30th July 1982. *He was a character, very proud of his hair! says Alan Boyers. Once when assisting at a landing, a bit of grease from the derrick fell on his hair and he went apeshit. He was an artist and painted it in the engine room among the Lister engines. Don’t know how he did it.*

He was to stay for four years until transferred to Tearaght, which he helped prepare for automation in 1988. In his time, he also served at two of Ireland’s most iconic lighthouses, the Fastnet and Skellig Michael.

A keen football fan, both American and soccer, he loved old movies and classical music and indeed developed into a very good painter. Forced to retire after twenty years in 1993, he died after a long-term illness in 2004.

Another McCarthy arrived on the Mullet peninsula in the 1980s. **John ‘Dillon’ McCarthy (669)** was a young Malin Head man, five years in the service but still only twenty-five years old when he joined the Eagle Islanders on the first day of 1983, having been made assistant keeper the day before. By this time, he already had a commendation under his belt. He ended up being one of the last three keepers to leave the island, each of them being interviewed by RTE on the occasion.

It was a comparatively short tour of duty for **Gerard Mary 'Gerry' O'Byrne (644)** from Inishannon county Cork, who arrived on the station on 25th March 1983 and left in 1985. He had joined Irish Lights as an eighteen-year-old in 1973, so had nearly ten years' experience by the time he came west, though the very fact of his appointment was rather strange. Apparently, he had got into an altercation with another keeper on the Tearaght and, at the subsequent disciplinary hearing, both keepers were told they would never serve on rock stations again. Gerry was sent to Roches Point and then ... to Eagle!

He does not appear to have been in the service in 1991. He retired from Irish Lights and bought a fishing boat down in county Cork.

For the last three years of the manned station, **Daniel Kevin 'Donal' O'Sullivan (560)** served on Eagle as assistant keeper from 1985 until the end. Born in 1944, he became an SAK in 1963, being promoted to AK in 1968. He had previously served on Tory and Inishtrahull among others. When the light on Eagle was automated, he briefly served as attendant there, though he was officially posted back to Tory. By 1991, he was acting PK at Ferris Point. He took early retirement in 1996 to become the attendant keeper at Inishtrahull and the assistant attendant at Tory Island.

Like Donal, **Michael James 'Mick' Barry (650)** served on Eagle from 1985 to 1988. Another Wicklow man, he was 32 on his arrival here and had served on the likes of Inishtrahull and Wicklow Head beforehand. He would later serve on Kish and Rathlin East.

And the final assistant keeper to join the ranks on Eagle was, appropriately, local man, **Gerard 'Gerry' Sweeney (622)**, a native of Blacksod where his parents had attended the light, famously changing the date of the D-Day landings with their forecast of dodgy weather ahead. Gerry was born in January 1952 and spent time on the Irish Lights tenders before joining the shore-based section of the organisation. He spent eight years on Tory and four years on Slyne Head prior to his returning home to the Mullet.

He featured in the *Great Lighthouses of Ireland* television series, talking about the November 1986 storm on Eagle. After automation, he remained on as attendant at both Eagle and Blackrock until the mid-nineties.

The wonderful maritime museum at Greencastle county Donegal has a page listing the stations served by **JJ (Sean) Doherty (619)**, otherwise he wouldn't have been included here. They list him on Eagle from 1987-88 after serving most of his career at lighthouses in Ulster. He retired in 1988 and became attendant at Inishtrahull and, later, Tory Island.

Louis Cronin was a twenty-year-old Supernumerary Keeper from Carn in 1981 when he was sent to Eagle Island for six months in 1981.

I was local, went to Belmullet Vocational School. My brother, A.J., became a lightkeeper and was well-liked and well-regarded in the job. Unfortunately, he died in a car crash in 1978. I was in school at the time. Anyway, I did my leaving-cert. It wasn't terrible but, at the same time, it wasn't great, so it was decided that I'd repeat it.

I remember sitting at home doing my schoolwork and Billy Heneghan, who was a family friend, came in. And I remember my mother saying to him, 'Thanks, Billy, for doing that.' And I thought no more of it but shortly afterwards there came a letter from Irish Lights offering me a job and I knew Billy had put a word in for me.

Like all supernumerary keepers, I did my training in the Baily and then got sent out to whatever station required an SAK I was on the Fastnet in 1979 when the big disaster happened and did other stations too.

Now, it was accepted that if your local station came up, then it was yours, so long as nobody else objected. And so, when Eagle Island came up, I jumped at it.

You had to send your two-week food order into Maeve Heneghan, God bless her, in Blacksod, and you had to work it out just right. Another lesson for life. You had to work it out, breakfast, dinner and tea. If you ordered too little, you went hungry. If you ordered too much, you had to leave it behind for the other keepers. If you were staying on the island after two weeks, you phoned your order in to Maeve Heneghan, and she'd send it out to you. As I said, it was good preparation for life.

I only wore the uniform three times in the three years I was in the service, and that was for the three disciplinaries I got, I always made sure I wasn't around when inspections were taking place. I couldn't stand the thought of telling them what they wanted to hear, rather than telling the truth! I got a commendation once though, when I was on the Fastnet.

For a bit of a lark, I used to turn the boiler up whenever Billy Heneghan was going to bed. I had a lot of time for Billy. I'd hear him turning over in the bed and then the footsteps coming down the stairs. Eventually, he got wise to it and locked the boiler room door.

Looking back, I can see the lightkeepers' life was not for me. Part of it was the fact that it had been foisted upon me, rather than it being my choice. It was very regimented with little room for humanity. I was always in trouble for something or other. I once got disciplined for running up a pair of trousers on the flagpole at the Baily while the Granuaile was passing. In the end, keepers around the coast used to tell the Baily to send anybody down except for Cronin.

But I learned some good life lessons in the three years I stuck it out.

We can narrow **Alan D. Boyers' (694)** time on the island down to 1985, as he served with Oliver Crowley, Eddie Copeland and Mick Shannon, as well as fellow SAK **Nicholas Martin 'Nick' Halpin (693)**. Alan was the son of Bob Boyers who was tragically killed in a car crash after completing a shift on the island in 1972. Starting his Irish Lights' career as an 'improver' in 1980, he soon became an SAK, volunteering for any station that came up, particularly those that his father had served on. He did two stints off the north Erris coast. He remembers seeing quite a lot of discarded old clay pipes around the truncated East light. He also remembers having to go down and unload stores with the derrick at the landing and one of the ropes snapping, much to the hilarity of the boatmen. Like many former keepers, he says he is 'disgusted' with the vandalism on Eagle Island and other stations that has been perpetrated by Irish Lights. Alan has spent 31 years as attendant at the Old Head of Kinsale.

Nick Martin Halpin (693) was born on 18th December 1962 and so was only seventeen when he started life as an SAK on 13th October 1980.

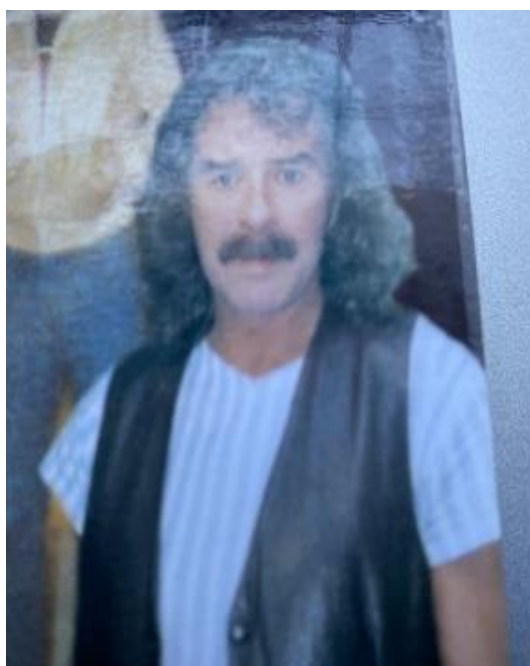
One keeper had one of the shortest terms of service on Eagle Island during the 1980s. SAK **P.F.J. 'Paul' O'Farrell (701)** was seconded to the crack Eagle team on 1st October 1986 and departed on the 3rd, though not through any wrong-doing on his part. Paul was a son of Frank O'Farrell who had done some time on Eagle as an SAK thirty years previously.

Paul, however, had another claim to fame. With a service number of 701, he was the very last in a long line of keepers to be awarded a number, since that particular system had started in 1900.



Richard Cummins (left) and John Hamilton, two SAKs on Eagle Island in the early 1980s

George Cavanagh, below left, (photo courtesy Catriona Silvestre McCole via Mary McCole) and Eddie Copeland (photo courtesy Brendan Copeland)





*Alan Boyers (left) (photo by Joy Tubby)
Dillon McCarthy (above) and the yellow dumper
truck
Gerry Sweeney (below)*



The 1980s

One thing about it though – it was a great place for picking mushrooms! There'd be a rush for them in the morning – Andy Newman

There was more alleged illegal fishing off Eagle Island at the start of the 1980s.

In July 1980, the captain of a Dutch fishing vessel, *The Frank Vrollijk*, was arrested fishing off Eagle Island. The Irish naval vessel *L.E. Grainne* escorted the boat to Rathmullen where the captain was placed under a 48-hour detention order. As there are no further reports of the case, it is possible this one got thrown out.

In a similar vein, a Spanish trawler, *Charolais*, was arrested off Eagle Island in December 1983 for illegal fishing. The captain was brought to Galway but again, nothing more was heard.

One case that did come to trial was the case of a Killybegs fisherman, who was charged at Letterkenny Circuit Court with fishing for herring 2.4 nautical miles off Tory Island. He had been arrested by the Fisheries Protection Vessel *Aoifa* and was found to have 112 boxes of herring on board the *Venture*.

John Poole, in his defence, said that they had been fishing for herring off Eagle Island and filled the 112 boxes with herring. This fish was not affected by the exclusion zone. Then the fish disappeared and so they decided to go mackerel fishing off Tory Island instead. He said, because of the cost of fuel, it would have been unprofitable to call in at Killybegs on the way, so they went straight to Tory. As it happened, he said, the nets were too large for the mackerel and they all escaped anyway. The jury found him not guilty.

In June 1985, lightkeepers on Eagle Island contacted the Shannon Marine Rescue Co-ordination Centre when they spotted two red flares close to the island at 3.30 in the morning. However, a local boat and an Irish Air Corps helicopter swept the area at first light and found nothing.

The *Evening Echo* of 26th October 1985 ran a story about a helicopter pilot who managed to land a piano on a two-foot ledge on the top of Blarney Castle for a jazz concert. *But it wasn't the trickiest job I've ever done*, said pilot, Captain Mick Hennessy. *That was when I slung a massive generator off Eagle Island and dropped it in the back of a truck.*

The second half of the decade saw a couple of terrible storms, as if the ocean, sensing the impending demanning of the station, was determined to show that, habited or not, the island was, and always would be, her domain.

The *Western People* of 3rd December 1986 reported that *strong westerly winds with gusts of up to 80mph, swept through Erris on Friday and Saturday week last, and caused many anxious hours to householders. Residents at Seaside (Seaside?) were forced to make a detour into the town to avoid the high seas which swept onto the main road. The village of Aughleaam withstood a fierce battering from the gale-force winds. Eagle Island lighthouse had a power failure and was not able to warn ships in the area of dangers. A 60ft. steel mast and a second one was damaged. This was the first time since 1880 that the mast was blown down. The lighthouse keepers on duty were Gerry Sweeney, Blacksod and Mick Shannon and D. McCarthy, Donegal."*

The latter keeper, Dillon McCarthy, was two years later asked to describe his most memorable incident of his time on Eagle.

That probably occurred November '86, when the Kowloon Bridge sank off the south coast, he said, speaking on R.T.E. and we had ferocious winds here on Eagle. And the seas were breaking over her at a height of 250 feet, I would think. And they smashed the lantern glass and extinguished the light, a very rare occasion in the history of the service. And it caused a multitude of damage to the rock here and in general. And we thought we were the next in line!

Gerry Sweeney went into further detail when interviewed on the subject. In the television series, *Great Lighthouses of Ireland*, he gave us a wonderful first-hand account of what it was like to experience that storm on Eagle Island:-

When the big wave would come, you'd hear a rumble from the bottom of the cliffs and then you'd know there was something bigger coming up. So the sea would come up the cliff and over the storm wall, over the building and you could actually feel the air being compressed in your ears, like flying in an aeroplane. And then, after a second, or maybe

half a second, there would be a big splash. And the flagstones in the yard would often be washed out the gate and way off down the island. And when the weather abated the next day, we'd go out and put them back in position.

The only time I was ever frightened was the night of 22nd November 1986. It was frightening that night because actually the water began to come in through the roof of the accommodation block.

It was something that had left the east coast of the States, the tail-end of some hurricane. Then, with the meteorological warnings and the shipping forecasts, we knew there was big stuff coming. And we knew because the sea was high – there was a high swell running for about a week or ten days beforehand and we knew that if the wind comes with this big sea, it was going to be bad. We'd be watching the barometer and it was falling, and falling quickly and that's usually a bad sign.

And the day before, it was very calm. You'll get that often, the calm before the storm, as they say. And nature itself, the birds, seagulls in particular, they'll leave Eagle Island and head into the mainland.

The first thing that happened was that the tower got hit by a wave, and some stones in the wave. We heard the glass breaking and we just looked up and the light was gone. There was no way we could get out to check the tower or check the engine room or anything.

There'd be an unearthly silence for maybe half a second and then all hell would break loose when the sea hit the yard and hit the buildings.

I was listening to the sea coming over the whole night, hitting the engine room and then I heard a rumble. Behind the accommodation block is a storm wall and I was sure the wall was gone, blown away and then I thought, will I, won't I, just open the door and take a quick look? I knew that if the wall was gone, the next place that would be going would be the accommodation block. So I quickly opened the door and looked out with the flash lamp. The wall was still there, thank God and we lasted then until morning.

So, it was the radio beacon mast I heard fall shortly after three o'clock that morning. If the storm wall had gone, somebody would be phoning up Margaret and saying, 'Is that the Widow Sweeney?'

Yes, it was frightening because I was married and had kids. I suppose it's a natural human reaction when you're in danger. Deep down, you were hoping it would ease off and, you know, it eased off very quickly the next morning.

I couldn't believe it when I went out and saw this big, huge radio beacon mast, just like you'd take a spoon and bend it, flattened over the engine room.

Speaking on RTE's Ryan Tubridy Show, he added: -

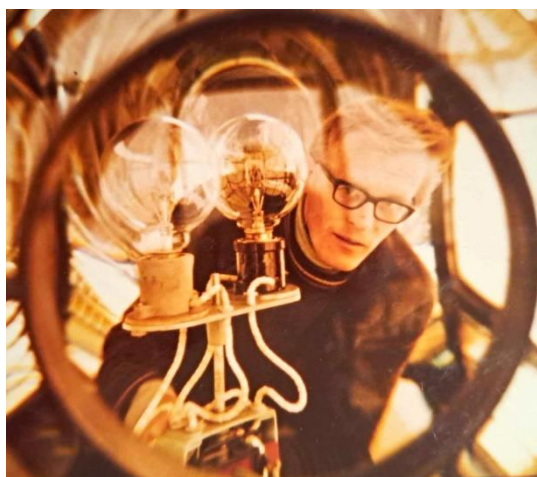
Now, a lot of people will see waves with white water. It wasn't like that at all on Eagle Island that night, I can tell you. It was a heavy, green sea and it came up over a 200-foot wall, the wave, and it would come over the accommodation block. And actually, inside the accommodation block, you could really feel the pressure in your ears of the air being compressed down and then, after a second, or one point five seconds, splash everywhere, water running everywhere.

And that particular night, the storm, or the hurricane, knocked out the main navigation light and it also knocked down a big radio beacon aerial across our engine room. We still had power, funnily enough. The generators stayed running and we were in touch with our

inspector in Dublin (I think it was Captain Gray at the time) and he did ask us did we want to be evacuated by Chopper but the Chopper wouldn't get near Eagle Island that night.

Knut Janson

The *Western People* said that people living on the mainland saw 30-foot waves assaulting the island. It also declared that *a helicopter made its way to the island to carry out repair work*, a remarkable statement which demonstrates the amazing development in helicopter technology by the 1980s. Beats the self-driving cars, that's for sure.



Knut Janson was one of eight Electronic Technicians (ETs) employed by Irish Lights and he was sent over to Eagle in the immediate aftermath of the storm, flying out by one of these robotic helicopters from Blacksod. *The glass had been smashed in on the lantern, he says, and parts of the oil tank sheds had been washed right down the island. In addition to this, the radio beacon mast had been bent and was lying on top of the engine house.* He had previously taken out the old WB6 mast and it was the new Aga one that fell. Later on, another beacon mast was installed. *Storms like that happened quite a lot, he says. You would hear the seas pounding on the roof.*

Noel McCurdy recalled the heavy green seas crashing down into the yard in the early seventies. *The worse thing was, he says, was that the toilet was on the other side of the yard. You had to wait and count and then run over as quick as you could or else you'd end up getting washed down the island. And then do the same on the way back.*

Donegal fishermen were complaining around the same time about the lack of VHF cover along that county's western coastline. The adequacy of VHF emergency band cover was hampering sea rescue operations and some areas were outside the range of VHF. The Government announced that there were plans for an additional facility to be placed at Glen Head on the Donegal coast or at Eagle Island off Mayo. Given Dillon McCarthy's comments on automation day in early 1988 about how it would be the VHF men who would feel it the most, it seems the Government went with Eagle, even though automation was less than fifteen months away.

In July 1987, Irish Lights officials made what would be their last official annual inspection of the rock. With over 150 years of these visits striking the fear of God into keepers and their wives, it would probably be fair to say that the dead men walking on Eagle were not that concerned about the outcome of the inspection. The officials could hardly complain about a cobweb in the fog shed if, come automation, the spiders would probably have a field day. Though, with the keepers having a completely professional attitude to their work at all times, the inspectors probably didn't find much to complain about.

In October 1987, Irish Lights announced that an automatic telephone was to be installed on Eagle, just five months before automation. Presumably, with many stations at this stage uninhabited, the old relay system of phone links around the coast was no longer viable. And, anyway, technicians and maintenance personnel would still need to visit after the keepers were gone.

The last Christmas with lightkeepers on the island took place in 1987. Keepers Mick Shannon and Gerry Sweeney, together with temporary keeper Noel Gaughan were probably sick of that Wham song by the time the New Year came around.

There was one final big storm on Eagle in early 1988 when, as the *Western People* reported on the 24th February, *Never was the sea at Belmullet so angry. Fish were thrown up on the shore at Cross and extensive damage was caused to Eagle Island lighthouse, about three miles from the mainland. The lighthouse was hit many times before and on one occasion, part of the 196-foot tower was damaged. The damage caused by this latest storm was not as severe as on other occasions.*" It should be pointed out that neither of the lighthouse towers were anything close to 196 feet tall. The RTE documentary on Automation Day mentioned that, in the storm of February 1988, there were winds of 130mph, damage to the stores, radio-mast and even the boundary wall.

Bill Long, writing in *Bright Light, White Water* (New Island Books 1993) says that he once visited the island shortly after a severe spring storm. *Windows had been shattered, ironwork twisted beyond recognition, doors and gates ripped from their hinges and flung across rocks and into the sea. And, incredibly, the three-foot thick storm wall had been breached in several places by the sea; whole segments of it had been lifted by the sea and flung across the miniature golf course. This course, so lovingly constructed and cultivated by the keepers, had been ruined overnight.* This was probably the January 1988 storm.

None of the keepers I spoke to remembered the miniature golf course built by Eugene O'Sullivan. Gerry Sweeney, who was on the island for the last two years said that there had been one keeper who used to bring a couple of clubs to the island and practise his swing but there were never any flags or holes or anything like that.

Peter Deaton was an LTM (Lighthouse Technician – Mechanical) and was on automation duties on Eagle in 1988 at the time of the storm. *At 3am, there was this massive thump and suddenly there was three feet of water in the yard, he said. There was damage to the fuel line that ran up from the landing up to the yard. Some of it was underground but another section was torn apart. There was also damage to the storm wall, about halfway down. It wasn't breached, but there was a lot of damage. Sometimes I would get up on the storm wall and look down the other side. It was a long way down and you could see where the seas would come up the slope.*

Fergus Sweeney was once told a story about a wave that was experienced by a fitter. The man was down around the helipad area when a rogue wave came over and completely covered the walled garden at the bottom of the island. Fergus reckons it must have been due to one of those rarer northerly swells, as that side of the island is much lower.

In August 1988, five months after automation, it was announced that Eagle Island's navigational directional beacon, which had allowed ships and planes to get their bearings and which had been pumping out its call sign since 1935 was to be transferred to Knock Airport. This was a direct consequence of demanning. The *Connaught Telegraph* announced that the new beacon, which would cost £250,000 to set up, *would be of*

immense value to planes destined for Knock. They would be able to take their bearings on both inward and outward transatlantic flights, the report said.

The report failed to clarify how this relocation would affect shipping, though presumably any boats sailing down the N59 towards east Mayo would still benefit.

The Last of the Keepers

It would be fair to say that it was not the fish in the sea nor the storms in the sky that the keepers on Eagle were concerned about but the elephant in the room. Many lighthouses had been automated and demanned by this stage and everybody was speculating who would be next. But in June 1984, Irish Lights made the announcement.

The scheme devised by Irish Lights had apparently already been sanctioned by the Board of Trade in London. This was in response to a remarkable downturn in the budget ringfenced for the Irish part of the Trinity House organisation. The budget in the previous year was £12m but the Irish contribution was only £1m, the statement said. As a result, six more lighthouses would be automated and demanned between 1984 and the end of 1988. These were the Old Head of Kinsale and Skellig Michael (1985-86); Inishtearaght and Inishtrahull (1986-87); and the Fastnet and Eagle Island (1987-88.) This would leave only seventeen manned lighthouses left and it was intimated that these would all be automated and demanned at a rate of two per year.

The plan was opposed by the lightkeepers, local fishermen and Fianna Fáil leader, Charlie Haughey, whose very existence was due in no small part to the vigilance of Mizen Head lightkeepers in 1985 who noticed his yacht in difficulties and shone lights and summoned aid. It was indeed fortunate for Mr. Haughey that Richie Foran and Richard Cummins had been around to save him and his party

As far as we are concerned, we do not object to automation, said Jim Cullen, spokesperson of the Lighthouse Committee and former Eagle Island keeper. *Certainly, technology will look after the lights. But account must be taken of the many services which we provide voluntarily above and beyond the call of duty.*

We work in close liaison with lifeboats, marine rescue services, gardaí, RUC and customs authorities, including the army and the air corps. We advise the Met Office on weather observations around the coast six times daily throughout the year. We scan our radar screens continually to observe any shipping that might be heading for danger.

As an example, Mr. Cullen cited two trawler disasters in consecutive years that happened off Rathlin O'Beirne shortly after the lighthouse there had been automated. He also said that keepers were annoyed that the consultation promised with the keepers over expected redundancies had not happened.

There were over 500 people employed by Irish Lights and the 144 keepers were the ones who were going to take the hit to safeguard the jobs of the others. Mr. Haughey had already told lightkeepers that manned lighthouses were absolutely essential around our coastline.

Irish Lights simply shrugged and got on with the automating and demanning.

On 25th May 1987, the *Irish Independent* reported a last-ditch attempt by the Lighthouse Keepers' Committee to at least save a handful of lighthouses from being demanned and a few keepers from being made redundant. Under the campaign, ten lighthouses would be

automated but would not be demanned. The keepers would be able to continue to provide a coast-watching service to ensure that the current chain of navigational services around the coast would not be lost.

The ten stations that the Lighthouse Keepers' Committee said should remain open were The Baily, Howth; Wicklow Head; Hook Head; Roches Point; Old Head of Kinsale; Mizen Head; Loop Head; Slyne Head; Eagle Island and Tory Island. Presumably the Northern Ireland lighthouses could go ahead and be demanned.

Representations were made by the Committee to the Department of the Marine on the matter but no definitive answer was received.

Irish Lights simply shrugged and got on with the automating and demanning.

Automation did not simply mean putting in a timer, said Mechanical Technician Peter Deaton, who had helped to automate Rockabill back in 1982. *There were three of us plus the keepers on Eagle, who got extra pay for working as general operatives, he explained. There was a lot of work to do. We installed three new diesel generators and wired them up so that, if one were to fail, another one would come on. We installed new fuel tanks with automatic filling of the daily service tanks which were fed from the main storage tank. We also had to fit all the fire systems including electronic and fuel shut-off valves.*

It was a very big and expensive job and we worked four weeks on, two weeks off, helicopter relief permitting. I remember there was one particular principal keeper who had an infatuation with water usage. There was a water tank on the roof and this fed the shower and wash room and he was always up checking the levels. One day, the levels were down a bit and he took away the key of the washroom, so we couldn't have a shower until the levels were back up. It was an obsession with him. We had to report him when we got back. If you were short of water, you get the ship to come in and bring more.



L-R Peter Deaton, John Donnelly (asst. depot manager), PK Frank O'Farrell and DE Burke, depot manager Dun Laoghaire, at the automation of Rockabill in 1982

We had to fix fuel lines from the hut down near the landing up to the oil sheds in the yard. They were made of everlasting plastic. They wouldn't last forever but they'd last a good few years. Anyway, we got them fitted as far as the yard entrance and then we realised we had no elbows. They were small fittings that would allow a tube to turn a corner. Well, there was no relief due, so we had to improvise. We got some tubing and wired a milk churn on a gas stove. God knows where the milk churn came from. And then we slowly bent the tubing around the churn. Took us a whole day to make four of them but we'd have been sitting around scratching ourselves if we hadn't, even though we could have got it from a hardware shop for a tenner.

March 1988 saw a hum of activity on Eagle Island. Technicians swarmed over and back from the island, putting in the final touches, checking and re-checking. The date was set for the 31st March and the helicopter was told the final relief of keepers would be made on that date. The three keepers whom the rota dictated should bid farewell to the island on behalf of the many, many keepers down through the years, were Billy Heneghan, Donal O'Sullivan and Donal McCarthy.

Fortunately, RTE was there on the day and the three keepers were interviewed about their moment of history bringing to an end over 150 years of human habitation on the island. Jim Fahy presented the snippet, which was broadcast the following day, 1st April.

The last three Eagle Island keepers were taken off at the weekend amid a series of helicopter shuttles back and forth from the mainland with supplies and technicians. One of the two Irish Lights vessels lay anchored in Blacksod Bay. As they left, a blizzard sprang up, giving the journalists and hierarchy a taste of what conditions were like.

Billy Heneghan PK - *A very sad occasion. Especially as a local here, it's very closed to home and the family. I spent many happy years here.*

(Most memorable occasion?) When I was going out for the first time on the relief boat from Scotchport, and the passage was very rough and that, and we were winched up by derrick onto the rock for the first time. I have memories of some very bad nights on it, but that's my most memorable.



*Billy
Heneghan, all
dressed up
for the
occasion, 31st
March 1988*

Donal O'Sullivan AK: *A very sad occasion leaving the Rock for the last time. The friends I had here were a very happy crowd to be with and I'll miss them very much.*

(Most memorable occasion?) *The first Christmas I was on there, we got a turkey from the local shopkeeper, a live turkey. A week before Christmas Day, we decided to go and kill it, so we went down to the compound where we had it and opened the door and the turkey flew out and into the sea. And that was our Christmas dinner gone.*

(Is there a ban on drink at the lighthouse?)

Yes, drink is not allowed on the lighthouse.

(Even on Christmas Day?)

No, no drink at all. (To be fair to Donal, he didn't actually say that nobody had a drink at Christmas – he merely stated that it was not permitted)

Dillon McCarthy AK: *Well, as the men said before me, a very sad occasion. We have provided a service here for 153 years. Unfortunately, now it's come to an end. That's the age of technology. But I would like to think that the next station that we go to will provide an equally good service. I think it is the VHF – the local men – they are the men who will suffer most. We had a VHF here keeping watch whenever possible and I think the local men were always confident there was somebody here who would listen out for them in case they did get into trouble but as I say, hopefully something will be done about that.*

(Most memorable occasion) *That probably occurred November '86, when the Kowloon Bridge sank off the south coast and we had ferocious winds here on Eagle. And the seas were breaking over her at a height of 250 feet, I would think. And they smashed the lantern glass and extinguished the light, a very rare occasion in the history of the service. And it caused a multitude of damage to the rock here and in general. And we thought we were the next in line!*

Henceforth the aid to navigation called Eagle Island lighthouse would be controlled and monitored via a telemetry link to Dun Laoghaire.

The island, however, was not completely deserted. Although the keepers were no longer required to tend the light and complete watches, there was still a lot of work to be done, so Donal O'Sullivan and Gerry Sweeney were asked to stay on until it was.

There were around twelve or thirteen men there at the time and the craic was ninety, remembers Gerry. The summer evenings were grand and we were all working sociable hours. We used to play cards in the evening and, at one stage, for a laugh, somebody brought out a Ouija board.

Now, there was one innocent looking feller there and we tried to get him into the Ouija board but he wouldn't bite. So, the second time, we told one man to go out and tell him that we were in here talking to an Irish feller on the Ouija board.

Well, your man comes running in and the lottery was not long after coming out.

'Ask him the lotto numbers!' cried your man.

'Ah, the man above might not be too happy about that,' says I.

'Sure, tell him we'll throw a priest a few pounds to say a mass for it,' answers your man.

Years later, I was talking to a man above in Howth and I happened to mention I had worked on Eagle Island.

'Ha! The Ouija board!' laughed your man. Obviously, the story had got around.

When everybody left, Donal O'Sullivan was sent to pastures new while Gerry was kept on as attendant with PJ Gaughan as his assistant. For the first time, they had to go and visit

a deserted Eagle Island. Gerry admits it wasn't a nice experience and somewhat eerie. *You'd be looking in rooms and remembering how things had been when the keepers had been there*, he said.

There wasn't really any time for cleaning or general maintenance as we had to perform maintenance on the generators and the other equipment. It wasn't easy spotting leaks. When the keepers had been in residence, it was much easier to notice something was wrong and to fix it. At least there were no slate roofs as such on Eagle! (The roofs had, of course, been reinforced with eighty tons of steel and concrete in the 1930s. Flying slates had been a major cause for concern for the trapped families in the 1894 storm!)



*Aerial view of the island from the north-east, showing the little-used East landing.
Photographer Sadie Reilly called it one of the calmest days of 2023.*

The 1990s

Stormy Seas

On racing out to assist a sea emergency in Clew Bay on the last day of October 1991, the crew of the Ballyglass lifeboat, *Mabel Williams*, encountered the worst sea conditions for eighty years, said their secretary Paddy Leech. *Conditions were so bad that the five crew members took twenty minutes reaching and boarding the lifeboat moored 200 yards off Ballyglass pier*, he said. The boat then encountered swells and waves up to 50ft. off Eagle Island en route to the scene - *Western People* 13th November 1991

A Spanish fisherman was airlifted to safety late last night by the Shannon marine emergency services helicopter.

He broke an ankle aboard a trawler, located off Eagle Island, just west of the Mullet peninsula, Co. Mayo, at approximately 7.30pm and the helicopter arrived on the scene a half hour later. He was airlifted to Shannon, where he was transferred to the Limerick Regional Hospital. His injuries were described as not serious - *Irish Examiner* 13th November 1996

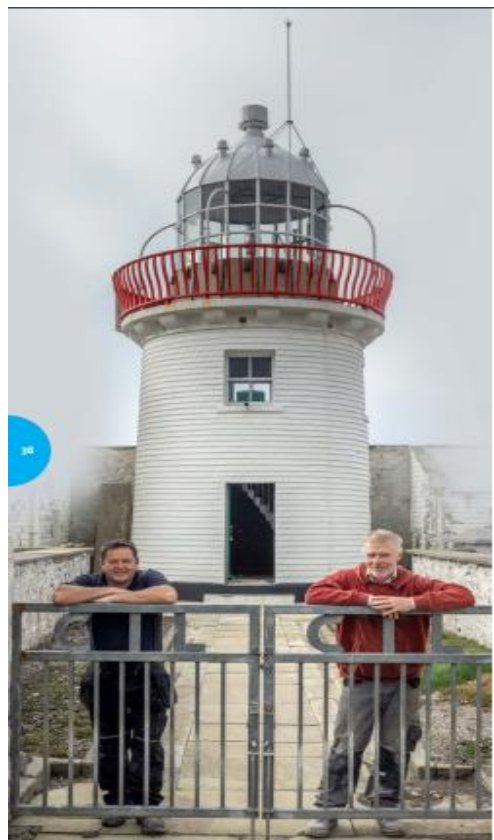
Attendants

Attendants	
Gerry Sweeney	1988-1996
PJ Gaughan	1988-1996
Noel Gaughan	1996-2003

As well as acting as attendants at Eagle Island, P.J and Noel Gaughan also performed the same duties at Blackrock Mayo, both of which are served from the helicopter base at Blacksod.

In June 2003, Noel resigned his position to take up appointment as a Coast General Worker for Irish Lights.

Noel Gaughan (right) at Inishgort lighthouse



The 1990s

There was an early example at the start of the decade that safety off the North Erris coast had not necessarily suffered due to the removal of the lightkeepers on Eagle Island. In September 1990, local fisherman Gerard Reilly was bringing his 40-foot trawler from Belmullet to Frenchport when the boat caught fire off Eagle Island. It was thought that an electrical fault may have been to blame. Mr. Reilly immediately issued a distress call, which was received up in Malin Head and relayed back immediately to Ballyglass, where the lifeboat *City of Bradford IV* was immediately launched. Other fishing trawlers also raced to the scene and the fire was soon quelled and the boat towed to Ballyglass. Gerard Reilly, said the report in the *Mayo News* (3rd October 1990) though shaken, was uninjured.

From 1st April 1992 the Radio beacon operated continuously, in accordance with new internationally agreed regulations whereby it was agreed that Medium Frequency Maritime Beacons should operate singly and continuously rather than in groups on a time-shared basis. In more recent times utilisation of radio direction finders by Mariners has been to a great extent superseded by more modern technology. For this reason, the Commissioners discontinued their Medium Frequency Radio beacon service on 1st February 1999 - Irish Lights notice.

Gardai were eager to contact the owner of 600 yards of a salmon fishing net which was lost by a fisherman off Eagle Island in July 1993. In case someone wasn't sure if the 600 yards of salmon fishing net was the one that had been lost, Gardai said it had two red buoys attached to it.

The unmanned island was a source of great disappointment for two Mulranny men, reported the *Western People* on 5th October 1994. James Grealis and Thomas Ginnelly, accompanied by Pat Kenny from Headford, were attempting to sail around Ireland in their 26-foot yacht *U2*. Leaving Clew Bay, they got as far as Eagle Island, easily riding every breaking wave, when their prop-shaft broke, leaving the boat moving in mysterious ways. Despite it being a beautiful day, they had to be towed to shore, without ever finding what they'd been looking for.



*The power supply 2015
(photo by Dave
Horkan)*

Severe Weather Events

*“This is perhaps the most exposed coast of the British Islands – in fact any place in England is quite insignificant when compared to it” – John Swan Sloane, ex-Superintendent of Foremen and Works of Irish Lights, writing in *The Irish Builder* 1st November 1880*

Any description of the heavy seas that assail Eagle Island on a regular basis inevitably account for them by the island’s proximity to the continental shelf or, more geographically, to its proximity to the *edge* of the continental shelf. Basically speaking, a continental shelf is simply an extension of the land area of a continent that has been submerged under a rising ocean. Many countries claim the continental shelf off their shores as an extension of their geographical boundaries, particularly if there are minerals to be extracted.

The continental shelf on average extends roughly forty miles (sixty-five kilometers) from the edge of the continent and slopes generally downwards from the land. Where the shelf ends, at roughly 460 feet (140 meters) of depth, the slope increases in steepness and plummets down to the ocean floor. Eagle Island is barely thirty miles away from the shelf edge, one of the nearest places in Ireland to it, and it is this fact, says conventional wisdom, that explains the violent weather and heaving seas.

Captain A.A. Bestic, who knew a thing or two about stormy seas, wrote, in the 1950s, *Marked on the Atlantic chart is the 100-fathom line at varying distances off the west coast of Ireland. It approaches Eagle Island to a distance of only 21 miles and from thence, the water shallows as the shore is approached.*

Most of us have watched a swell approaching a beach and noticed how it rises higher and higher until it finally topples over. Similarly, on a grand scale, seas mount up in shoaling water.

However, when one examines this statement, which has been repeated in practically every description of Eagle Island I have come across, it doesn’t really make a lot of sense.

Does the sea suddenly start to froth and boil when approaching a continental shelf? Why would the effect be felt at thirty miles distance and not, say, fifty miles? Does the sea dissipate its energy over time and distance? The evidence would seem to be rather the opposite.

Eoin MacCraith, Senior Geologist in the Marine and Coastal Unit Programme of Geological Survey Ireland, believes the proximity of the edge of the continental shelf is not really a factor in explaining the storms that have afflicted Eagle Island over the years.

The rough seas experienced by Eagle Island are more to do with its western, exposed position as opposed to anything related to the position of the shelf edge, he says, a view shared by an oceanographer at the Marine Institute.

Eagle Island is still quite a way from the shelf break, generally defined as the 200 m depth contour, he says. *When you have canyon systems or a rapid change in bathymetry over a short distance you can get a very focused wave climate. This would happen at places like the Cliffs of Moher where wave cut platforms change water depth from say 50 m to 10 m over a short horizontal distance.*

I know they have measured some very large waves off Belmullet ... but this is largely due to fetch. When the wind blows continuously from Greenland to Ireland you can get waves exceeding 20m (significant wave height) with even higher individual waves.

I think (Eoin MacCraith's) take of it just being a very exposed location is as good an explanation as any.

So, basically, and to unwillingly use a Trumpism, it's nothing to do with the continental shelf. It's just weather. It should be realised also that, although the waves frequently crash over the lighthouse, this doesn't mean that the waves themselves approach the island over 200 feet high.

Professor Joly, who accompanied the annual inspection of Eagle Island in 1918, suggested that it may have been the particular slope of the cliffs leading up to the lighthouse that allows the waves, in stormy weather and high tides, to achieve such phenomenal heights. It is also worth noting that the example of the destructive power of the sea most cited was the December 1894 storm. In this storm, the West lighthouse escaped relatively unscathed. Whereas the lantern was smashed in the East lighthouse, at the same focal plane as the West, the damage to the keepers' houses was done at a much lower level, further down the slope of the contour of the storm wall.

It should be noted also that, although the lanterns of the two towers were at exactly the same height, the East tower was tall and slender and stuck out many feet above the protecting storm wall, whereas the shorter, dumpier West tower was much more protected by the storm wall. Waves might occasionally assault the lantern of the west tower but many more would hit the East tower, and the keepers' houses, which were at a much lower altitude. And when the seas came rolling in from the E.N.E. or even N.E., the slope of the cliffs would allow a much greater volume of water to crash down on the East lighthouse dwellings than on the West. And when one hears the terrifying descriptions of storms from the West lighthouse, it blows the mind to think that those on the East lighthouse would have had it even worse.

In reality, it seems as though a combination of factors work to generate the photogenic scenes of green water crashing down over the island. High tides align with several days of strong winds can build a sea into a fury and drive it up the cliff face on the western side of the island.

If one were to document every storm, hurricane or tidal wave that ever assailed the lighthouses on Eagle Island, not only would one be at it for a very long time, but it would also become extremely tedious too. These days with our named storms, very few of them would manage to get on the list of the hundred greatest ever weather events at the island. Here are some of the more noteworthy ones.

c.1835 – the two lighthouses, built to two storeys high, dwelling places, tools and equipment were washed off the island.

17th January 1836 – lantern pane shattered by wave-tossed rock, light extinguished, dwelling houses damaged.

5th-6th February 1850 – both lanterns badly damaged, lights extinguished, two breaches in the storm wall

11th March 1861 – 23 panes of glass in the East Tower were shattered, lamps and reflectors damaged, water flooded tower.

8th December 1886 – sea derrick and landing stages and steps severely damaged.

29th-30th December 1894 – East Tower damaged, panes shattered, light extinguished, East tower dwelling houses severely damaged.

1921 – lantern smashed in by winter hurricane (Bestic)

January 1935 – Four-inch-thick lantern glass smashed, light extinguished, dwelling houses severely damaged.

November 1986 – lantern glass shattered, light extinguished, radio beacon mast toppled

February 1988 – tower damaged

Author Keith McCloskey in his brilliant book, *The Lighthouse: The Mystery of the Eilean Mor Lighthouse Keepers*, delves into the unsolved disappearance of the three keepers from that Scottish island in 1900. When a relief boat landed a keeper on St. Stephen's Day after reports that the light was unlit, he found no trace of keepers James Ducat, Thomas Marshall and Donald MacArthur, a mystery that has endured to this day.

Eilean Mor is roughly similar in size to Eagle Island and has a similar aspect, being outside the Outer Hebrides and facing thousands of miles of the open Atlantic. McCloskey makes the comparison.

Although it may seem simplistic, he writes, the fast approach of a giant wave sweeping the three men to their deaths is what most people have alighted on as the most obvious answer...

There is an interesting parallel to the Eilean Mor Lighthouse some three hundred miles to the south-west on the stormy and windswept coast of county Mayo, Ireland. The location and situation of the Eagle Island station was in many ways very similar to the Eilean Mor Lighthouse in that both were a similar height above the sea, built on rocky islands and faced the same Atlantic storms sweeping in from the west...

The damage caused by the storm on 11 March 1861 to the east light tower shows that waves were capable of reaching up to a height of 220 feet and causing damage; there was of course a serious risk to anybody hit by the water at that height. This is strongly worth taking into account when looking at what possibly happened to Ducat, Marshall and Macarthur. The highest point of Eilean Mor is only 8 feet higher than the top of the east light tower on Eagle Island... the tops of the cliffs by the west landing ... are considerably lower.



Lavelle's Eagle Bar in Corclough

2000 - present

Stormy Seas

A crewman aboard the fishing trawler *Aine Patricia* injured his arm with the vessel close to Eagle Island. The Ballyglass lifeboat subsequently brought him to safety – *Irish Independent* 6th March 2006

A boat carrying a skipper and five divers developed engine trouble off Eagle Island. The Ballyglass lifeboat picked them up off Eagle Island and towed them back to safety – *Connaught Telegraph*, Wednesday 5th September 2007

A Shetland Islands trawler-hand has been winched to safety by an Irish Coastguard helicopter. The man had sustained crush injuries in heavy seas off Eagle Island and was winched aboard the helicopter while five-metre-high seas were raging. The 76.4m pelagic trawler *Altaire* was registered in Lerwick. The seaman is recovering in Sligo General hospital – *Connaught Telegraph*, Tuesday 19th January 2010

2000 to present

On 24th August 2001, Irish Lights issued a *Notice to Mariners* detailing the change of the lighthouse to solar-powered. This necessitated the provision of a temporary light for approximately two weeks while the old light was removed and the new one was being installed.

The old light was white and flashed three times in a ten second period. It was lit twenty-four hours per day and had a range of twenty-three nautical miles. Its character was Flash 0.1 seconds, Dark 1.6 seconds, Flash 0.1 seconds, Dark 1.6 seconds, Flash 0.1 seconds, Dark 6.5 seconds. This was the sequence referred to in Dermot Healy's 1994 novel, *The Goat's Song*.

The light from Eagle Island lighthouse swept across the sky three times. Count eight. Three times again.

And a night sky illuminated every ten seconds by three sweeping flashes of light from Eagle Island. When they woke in the middle of the night, they waited for them: the Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The temporary light had a character of three flashes every fifteen seconds viz. Flash 0.15 seconds, Dark 2.4 seconds, Flash 0.15 seconds, Dark 2.4 seconds, Flash 0.15 seconds, Dark 9.75 seconds. It had a range of 11 nautical miles.

The new solar-powered light had the same characteristics as the temporary light but would be visible at a range of nineteen nautical miles. It is unlikely that Dermot felt it necessary to rewrite his novel in light of the new sequence. The new light was established on Sunday 4th November 2001.

On 28th September 2002, the *Irish Independent* reported that Richard Bridges Beechey's snappily titled oil painting *The Irish brigantine, Sligo, and other vessels in rough weather below the Eagle Island lighthouse, county Mayo*, which he painted in 1874, had been sold at auction in London for £27,000. It was sold to an Irish dealer who presumably didn't feel sea-sick every time he looked at it.



Attendees of the 2023 lightkeepers' reunion pose on the cliffs near Dun na mBó (photo by Richard Cummins)

The Irish Radio Transmitters' Society scored something of a coup in December 2003, when Daniel EJ9FHB – crazy surname but these amateur radio guys are weird anyway – broadcasted live to the world from Eagle Island lighthouse. The event was reported in the IRTS Radio News Bulletin of 21st December 2003 and I transcribe it almost verbatim, as I am not too sure it is written in English.

EJ9FHB on Eagle Island F63 Mayo

Daniel EI9FHB recently operated from Eagle Island Lighthouse, which is situated on Eagle Island a short distance off the coast of Mayo. Operating the rare square Fox 63 and Island EU121 he worked a number of EI stations.

Daniel who works for the Commissioners of Irish Lights visits lighthouses regularly for routine checks and repairs. The Commissioners of Irish Lights look after all the lighthouses in the 32 counties including many unmanned offshore lights and buoys.

On Wednesday the 10th of December last, Daniel flew from Blacksod helipad out to the barren deserted Eagle Island bringing a HF rig in tow. Eventually time was found on Friday in a busy 5-day schedule to erect the G5RV aerial which was used for all contacts.

Band conditions were not great Friday and Saturday night so most of the contacts were made on Sunday. On setting up on Sunday, after gale force winds the night before, there appeared to be an intermittent fault with the aerial. Eventually this was tracked down to a dodgy patch lead and operation was resumed just in time to say "failte" to Paddy EI7GK who had just finished reading the IRTS news as Gaeilge.

Following the initial contact with Paddy, Noel EI6HW helped control the pileup that ensued for the next hour as word of this unusual square spread. Daniel, being a South Dublin Radio Club member, hoped to contact fellow members and as luck would have it Nick EI2JL appeared on frequency.

Daniel travelled back on Monday but will return again in the future. A new QSL card from EI9FHB is also available which features Kinsale Lighthouse...

Daniel's speciality is electronics, which involves installing, repairing and checking complex remote computer monitoring and electronic control systems. These are used to automatically run lighthouses and report faults back to the head office. As well as main VHF radios many lighthouses have Radar Transponder beacons that are used by boats to fix their position in fog using radar.

In his 'Engineering Report' in *Beam 34* (2005-2006), Irish Lights Head of Engineering, Seamus Doyle, the need to maintain the keepers' dwellings at offshore lighthouses was highlighted. It appears that the need for ventilation, rather than heat, was the priority when maintaining dwellings. Combined solar-diesel heaters were being used to condition dwellings to ensure they were habitable when required. As a result, said Seamus, the dwellings at Bull Rock and Eagle Island had been upgraded to maintain living conditions.

One of the more controversial operations regarding the light occurred in 2013. Irish Lights called it the CIL Eagle Island Consolidation Project. Less grandiosely, one wag dubbed it the Circumcision Project.

The project called for the replacement of the entire upper part of the lighthouse structure with a cap and an LED light. Captain Robert McCabe, Director of the Operations and Navigation Services with Irish Lights, stated that *Eagle Island lighthouse stands 220 feet above the Atlantic Ocean yet, over the years, waves from winter storms have damaged buildings and equipment in the walled lighthouse compound. Eagle Island lighthouse must provide a reliable and effective aid to navigation in extreme conditions because it is, at these times, when mariners most require Irish Lights aids. The new light on Eagle Island will provide a high quality, highly reliable 18-mile LED light and, for the first time, an automatic identification system. The solar battery system will remove the requirement for diesel generation with consequent environmental benefits and maintenance savings.*

As in 2001, the operation called for the provision of a temporary light for twenty-four weeks while the works were taking place. The temporary light was exhibited on a white pedestal a few yards north-west of the tower. It still had the same characteristics – three flashes every fifteen seconds – but it was only visible for 344° as opposed to 360° and had a range of only ten nautical miles.

When the new LED light came online, the scope of the light reverted to 360° and it could be seen for eighteen nautical miles. Instead of flashing three times every fifteen seconds, it now flashed three times every twenty seconds.

(This was changed back to three flashes every fifteen seconds in June 2017)

Commenting on the success of this unique construction challenge, Captain Robert McCabe stated, *The Irish Lights team who delivered this complex project have demonstrated exceptional engineering, planning and construction skills and made a positive contribution to safety at sea and the marine environment.*

A press release, dated 18th November 2013, was keen to stress the environmental benefits of the new system.

After almost 200 years of guiding mariners to safety, the lantern room and domed roof of the lighthouse tower had reached the end of their working life. The old lighthouse dome, the lantern room, the large glass lens and the bath of mercury in which the lens rotated were all removed. They were replaced with a stainless-steel structure designed by Irish Lights to withstand the aggressive and relentless marine environment.

This structure was manufactured by Shortt Stainless Steel in Limerick and incorporates a new roof, a guarded access platform and light pedestals. The roof also supports new waterproof and weather resistant flashing LED (light emitting diode) lights.

A temporary works system was also designed to access the previous dome for demolition works. This platform incorporated the means to manhandle heavy equipment and the helicopter deck on which to land the new dome. Constructing all of this on top of the lighthouse tower was extremely challenging.

A story later circulated that the dome, lantern and mercury bath were carefully dismantled and are now on display in a museum in New Zealand. When I contacted Barry Phelan of Irish Lights, he told me that *the lantern room itself was corroded and was scrapped (this was the reason behind the project back then). The optic was bought by a museum in Australia for refurbishment there – so the grapevine wasn't too far wrong.* Enquiries in Australia have failed to uncover the whereabouts of the optic but I have no reason to doubt that the optic did survive and is out there somewhere.

The Commissioners of Irish Lights (CIL) is actively involved in consolidating its coastal infrastructure which is the latest chapter in technology change that CIL is currently implementing, said the press release at the time. *First came automation, then solarisation and now consolidation. The overriding purpose of consolidation is to provide a low-maintenance, low-energy, and low-cost Aids to Navigation service around the Irish Coast.*

But of course, it is a terrible shame that *consolidation* included no way of preserving the lantern. One wonders if it ended up in the ocean, like the fog signal apparatus.

The removal of the dome from Eagle Island was/is even more galling to former keepers because there was no precedent for it. In *Beam 39* in 2010, it was revealed that the dome on Inishtrahull had been replaced by a Glass Reinforced Plastic (GRP) dome. This was a dome only 50 years old and it was accepted that, if the dome was no longer fit for purpose, a new, stronger dome was a reasonable solution.

The following year, 2011, *Beam 40* revealed that the dome on Blackrock, Mayo, had been *seriously corroded and in need of replacement* and had therefore been replaced with a moulded GRP dome.

Two years later, it seems that the policy had changed and Irish Lights were not willing to fork out for another GRP dome.

In a similar vein, Irish Lights removed all the oil from the two generators. *There was no reason to do that, says one commentator, other than to make the generators seize up, so it would no longer be their responsibility. They hardly needed the oil.*

This attitude may not have raised many eyebrows in the 1980s but it seems as though the mindset was still the same in 2013. To be fair, Irish Lights provides an excellent Aids to Navigation service and that is their primary objective. I would say cost-cutting is a close second. Preservation of our maritime heritage is a long way down the list. This was a job that was often carried out by lightkeepers. If a gutter leaked or a pane of glass was cracked in a tower, the keeper would get it fixed.

But now, with the elimination of the keepers and the phasing out of the attendants, minor repairs to dwellings and towers are not being carried out by the technicians who fly out once a month to install a new Woodies' LED bulb. Every spring, the tourist guys at Loop Head open up for the season and have to mop out the tower where the rain has got in. The keepers' houses on the Bull Rock are practically gone and Inishtrahull dwellings were gutted a few years ago.

The stump of the Calf Rock lighthouse stands on its rock at the end of Dursey Island, its cast-iron shell completely rusted. But it has a dignity. It is a victim of man's struggle with the elements; a symbol of the power of an ocean that Man thought he could tame.

They had two aerial masts (on Eagle) but they took one down for fear it might interfere with the helicopter landing pad, says Richard Cummins. The remaining one was once painted yellow. Now it's just a rusty hulk. It's in a shocking state. You'd nearly cry now when you see the Eagle Island lantern and all the polishing and cleaning that happened there down through all the years. They're destroying Irish maritime heritage and not just on Eagle. The floorboards were ripped out of the accommodation block on Ballycotton; they threw everything out of the cottages on Skellig; burned the furniture on Inishtrahull; Kinsale's balcony door is tied shut with a rope. There's a lot of former keepers disgusted with the way things are going.

Former Irish Lights technician, Knut Janson believes the Government should step in. *Our maritime heritage, our industrial heritage, our Irish heritage is all being destroyed, he says. The engineers today don't care about heritage. If Irish Lights say they have no money to preserve it, then it should be done by the Government. But there is always an excuse why they can't.*

The remains of the East tower lighthouse on Eagle Island have dignity similar to the remains of the Calf Rock. For sixty years it faced the fury of the high winds and waves that lambasted the island until it finally succumbed one dreadful night in late 1894. There is no shame in defeat to an enemy as powerful as the one that it faced.

But for the West lighthouse, there is no dignity. It is no longer a thing of beauty. It was the dome that gave it the architectural merit so beloved by lighthouse lovers the world over. Now it sits there, emasculated, an ancient and noble edifice, shorn of its manhood, like a noble warrior protected by a tiny pinprick of light on a stick. It has been humiliated, not by a raging enemy against whom it valiantly fought but by a faceless, soulless corporate entity that, despite its fine words, seems to regard cost-cutting as adequate justification for destroying the heritage that its forefathers – despite all their faults – worked so hard to create.



The very unlovely top of the West tower today

In August 2015, experienced sea-kayaker, Dave Horkan, took advantage of some fine weather to travel out to the island. In fact, so agreeable was the sea that he found the East landing with only a small swell. He proceeded up to the West light and found two workers from Irish Lights.

They were surprised to see me and were happy to let me look around and join them for a cup of coffee, said Dave. We chatted about the storms and life on the island. Sadly, they were just there for a few days to clear out the buildings and lock the place up completely. With the installation of LED lights and developments in technology, there is little or no need for any human contact anymore. Looking around the buildings, their good condition was surprising and it seems a real shame for them to be closed up. I signed the visitor book, as I may well be one of the last to do so after 180 years.



Furniture outside the door of the accommodation block (photo by Dave Horkan)



Old correspondence ledgers seen by Dave on 8th August 2015. Hopefully these and the Visitors Book did not get destroyed and are safe somewhere (Photo by Dave Horkan)

Gerry Sweeney was brought back to Eagle to film the *Great Lighthouses of Ireland* TV series a couple of years ago.

I stepped out of the helicopter and all I could see everywhere was goose shit, he remembers. Don't ask me if they were barnacle geese or Brent geese, some sort of wild geese, anyways. And it was everywhere. In the yards, on the paths, on the grass. Everywhere. It seemed a that once the humans left, the geese came in.

And I wondered if this was the way the island had been before the lightkeepers arrived.



Domed West tower looking back to the mainland (photo courtesy F. Pelly)



Eagle Island from the mainland 2023 (photo by Richard Cummins)

Further reading

Bathurst, Bella - *The Wreckers*
Baxter, Martha Power – *The Irish Light Keeper's Legacy*
Butler, Gerard - *The Lightkeeper*
Chadwick, Lee - *Lighthouses and Lightships*
Garrity, John – *Ancestral Voices*
Hague, Douglas and Christie, Rosemary - *Lighthouses - Their Architecture, History and Archaeology*
Goulding, Peter - *When the Light Goes Out*
Hickey, Anthony - *Mayo and the Battle of the North Atlantic*
Irish Lights - *Safety for All*
Krauskopf, Sharma – *Irish Lighthouses*
Long, Bill - *Bright Lights, White Water*
Lysaght, Seán – *Eagle Country*
McCarron, Edward - *Life in Donegal*
McCloskey, Keith - *The Mystery of the Eilean Mor Lighthouse Keepers*
Murphy, Pap & Kathryn – *Turas Siar (online)*
Nicholson, Christopher - *Rock Lighthouses of Britain & Ireland*
Nolan, Rita - *Into the West*
O Raghallaigh, Tomás Bán - *Amongst Our Own - The Inniskeas*
O Reilly, Roger - *Lighthouses of Ireland*
Otway, Caesar - *Sketches in Erris*
Scanlan Don - *Memories of an Islander*
Stocker, Leonard V. – *Born on the Edge of White Water*
Taylor, Richard - *The Lighthouses of Ireland*
Wilson, TG - *The Lighthouse Service*

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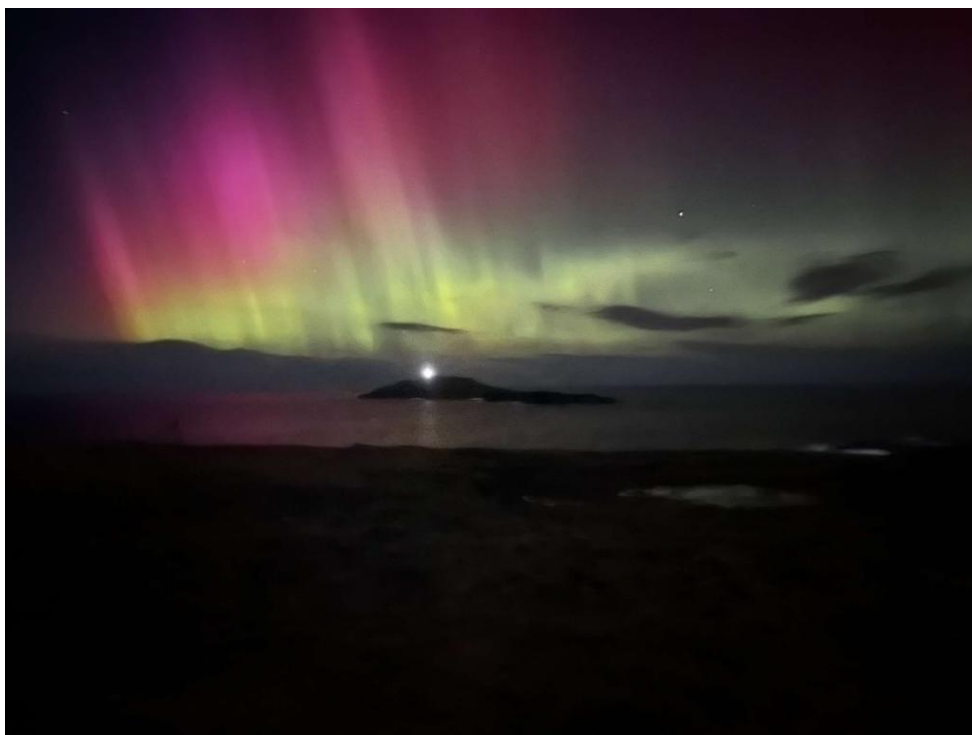
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Aurora borealis over Eagle Island in 2024 (photo courtesy Eamon McAndrew)

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Note – in preparing this book for pdf, the page numbers for the second part of the book may be out very slightly. On estimate, this would take me two days to fix so I haven't. My apologies.

Postscript

After finishing this book, it was too big for publishers to be interested in it and too expensive to self-publish, due to ever-increasing printing and postage costs.

I was however very conscious of the fact that many people had helped me to bring this book to life; people who were hoping it would be, if not the definitive account, at least a reasonably well-researched account of Eagle Island, a place where they or their forefathers had served, serviced, resided or gazed out upon for many years.

Very reluctantly, I decide to pare down the book, removing all the beautiful photographs I had been sent, removing the chapters on the Stientje Mensinga, lepidoptera, moving station, Hy-Brasil. I very soon began to feel the book was being emasculated in the same way its subject matter was.

After many months, in which the other lighthouse projects in my brain were screaming at me to find some sort of solution and move on, I decided to simply produce a pdf of the book and make it available to anybody who wanted it. Once made, the decision took a weight off my shoulders.

I believe the book is available on Lulu and possibly elsewhere, probably at an extortionate price, for those who prefer more traditional reading material.

Pete Goulding 2025



Eagle Island is a steep, fourteen-acre rock a mile or so off the northwestern coast of the Mullet peninsula in county Mayo. Home to some of the roughest seas in the North Atlantic, two lighthouses were established here in the 1830s to help to alleviate the terrible loss of life at sea on this part of the seaboard. For sixty years, keepers and their families lived on this beautiful, yet often inaccessible, island until one dark, December night, the ocean struck back ...

This is the story of the island, its flora and fauna, its roles in the two world wars, the alleged piracy that occurred off its rocky shores and the ships that foundered in its tempestuous seas. But mostly, it is the story of the lighthouses and the keepers that manned them from construction to automation, and an insight into the life of a keeper and his family from early days to the very end. With the help of anecdotes from many former keepers, as well as newspaper reports and genealogical research, the book serves as a microcosm of the lightkeeper's life at rock stations around the country. It is also a testament to the brave, local men who rowed keepers, mail and provisions to and from the island for over 130 years in small boats in wide seas.

